Inclusive Language in Italian

An Experimental Investigation of the -ə Suffix

Federica Marenghi, Anna Cardinaletti, Alice Suozzi

e-ISSN 2974-6574 ISSN 2974-6981

Linguaggio e Variazione | Variation in Language 7

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e-ISSN 2974-6574
ISSN 2974-6981

URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/collane/livval-linguaggio-e-variazione/

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Venezia
Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press
2026

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Edizioni Ca' Foscari
Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari | Dorsoduro 3246 | 30123 Venezia
https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/ | ecf@unive.it

1a edizione
Marzo 2026
ISBN 979-12-5742-035-2 [ebook]

Cover design | Progetto grafico di copertina
Lorenzo Toso

Inclusive Language in Italian. An Experimental Investigation of the -ə Suffix / Federica Marenghi, Anna Cardinaletti, Alice Suozzi — 1. ed. — Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2026. — viii + 188 pp.; 23 cm. — (LiVVaL; 7). — ISBN 979-12-5742-035-2

URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/libri/979-12-5742-035-2/
DOI http://doi.org/10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2

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An Experimental Investigation of the *-ə* Suffix
Federica Marenghi, Anna Cardinaletti, Alice Suozzi

Abstract

Many morphological innovations have been proposed to expand the boundaries of gender binarism in Italian. To test the interpretation of *-ə* we designed an experiment adapting the sentence-picture matching task used by Bradley et al. (2019) for English. The study sets out to establish whether (i) the adoption of *-ə* entails activation of a nonbinary referent (or group) or a mixed-gender group; (ii) the comprehension of sentences containing *-ə* requires higher processing costs, by looking at participants' response times; (iii) the masculine form triggers the specific interpretation more frequently. To disentangle the contribution of linguistic processing from potential visual interference, a follow-up study was later conducted without images.

Keywords Inclusive language. Grammatical gender. Degendering and regendering strategies. Neomorpheme *-ə*. Italian.

Table of Contents

Introduction 3

1 The Biological and Grammatical Gender Mismatch 5

2 Bucking the Trend: From Marking to Neutralizing the Difference 23

3 Testing the Efficacy of Adopting the Suffix *-ə* to Achieve Grammatical Gender Inclusion 47

4 Data Analysis and Results 93

5 Investigating Gender Interpretation Without Images: Evidence from a Follow-Up Study 127

6 General Discussion 143

7 Conclusions 151

Appendix 157

Bibliography 177

Inclusive Language in Italian

An Experimental Investigation of the -ə Suffix

Introduction

Numerous morphological innovations have been advanced to expand the boundaries of gender binarism in Italian. Among the proposals, the suffix *-ə* seems to be leading the way towards finding feasible solutions. Since it appears to be more accessible than other graphic strategies (e.g., -*; -@), as it can be pronounced and read, the suffix *-ə* has become more widespread and in need of systematization. Before even attempting at proposing a possible standard, we need to test the interpretation of this suffix. To this purpose, we designed an experimental study adapting the sentence-picture matching task used by Bradley et al. (2019) for English. The focus of our analysis is threefold. The first objective is to establish whether the adoption of the suffix *-ə* triggers immediate activation of a nonbinary-gender referent or group (henceforth glossed as NB) or a mixed-gender group. The second objective is to assess whether the comprehension of short texts containing sentences like *Lə candidatə risulta regolarmente iscrittə all'anno accademico in corso* 'The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is duly enrolled.NB.SG in the current academic year' requires higher processing costs responsible for slowing down the reading and matching task, by looking at participants' response times. The third objective is to determine whether the masculine form, which encodes

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/000

either a specific or a generic meaning (e.g., *La ricetta preparata dal medico* 'the prescription written by the.M.SG doctor.M.SG'; *I medici parteciperanno a un convegno nel fine settimana* 'The.M.PL doctors.M.PL will attend a conference over the weekend'), activates the specific interpretation more frequently, thus decreeing the potential inability of the masculine form to serve as representative of a multitude encompassing different genders.

In addition to the sentence-picture matching task, two questionnaires were administered to the participants. Data on their reading habits and their attitudes with respect to the suffix *-ə* were also collected, to determine whether our sample already came across this new suffix and to what extent they are willing to embrace such innovations and embark on the journey towards reaching gender-respectful linguistic results.

In a follow-up experiment, the same structure as in the main experiment was used, but the task required choosing linguistic labels rather than images. This allowed us to test whether the results of the main experiment were somehow affected by the complexities of the visual materials.

The book is organised as follows. Chapter 1 includes a review of the literature on the topics from which the study evolved. After outlining the sociological context and the features of "sex-based grammatical gender systems" (Corbett 2013b as formulated in Gygax et al. 2019, 2) as opposed to neutral ones, the focus is shifted to the structure of the Italian declension system, by shedding light on the mechanisms underlying derivational processes, which lead back to the generic meaning of the masculine form. Chapter 2 presents an overview of gender-fair morphological innovations – including both degendering and regendering strategies – in the context of Italian and across different languages. Chapter 3 provides a thorough description of the experimental design. The sentence-picture matching task experiment is preceded by the Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey, conceived as a crucial step in the fine-tuning of the visual materials. The chapter continues with the presentation of two questionnaires measuring attitudes toward the use of nonsexist language as well as reading practices. Data analysis and discussion are reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the follow-up experiment. The general discussion is undertaken in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 draws the conclusions.

1 The Biological and Grammatical Gender Mismatch

Index 1.1 Introduction. – 1.2 De-Constructing the Notion of Gender. – 1.3 The Classification of Grammatical Gender Systems. – 1.4 Gender Binarism in Italian. – 1.5 The Masculine Form's Tilted Ambiguity: From Generic to Specific Bias.

1.1 Introduction

Primarily social, but also biological and political reasons have jointly contributed to spurring the debate around inclusive language, a topic treated in this book from a purely linguistic perspective by assessing the interventions that can be implemented at the level of language. Before delving into the linguistic phenomenon under investigation, it is necessary to discuss the complex relationship between biological sex and grammatical gender, and the implications it has had on the sociological dimension for an entire community of speakers. This serves as a premise to illustrate the groupings of languages depending on the gender system they are endowed with, to then focus on Italian, which displays an inherent gender binarism whose peculiarities are described. Some considerations on the double nature

LiVVaL 7
DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/001

of the masculine – and the resulting specificity and markedness of the feminine form – conclude the chapter by adopting a cross-linguistic approach.

1.2 De-Constructing the Notion of Gender

The term 'gender' has yet to find a shared definition. It may be framed as the set of *social* conventions determining the difference between masculinity and femininity (Felluga 2015) – a definition that, despite being far too restrictive, highlights the quintessential social nature of gender. This is so blatant that Judith Butler (1988) goes as far as to argue that gender cannot be conceived as an objective natural thing, it only exists to the extent that it is performed. Once established that "gender reality is performative", one can exclude that it is (automatically) linked to material bodily facts (Butler 1988, 527). In outlining its artificial, conventional and historical dimension, Butler (1988, 522) insists that

> Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.

A major distinction thus enters the scene, i.e., gender *versus* biological sex. Gender and biological sex may be intertwined. In the collective imagination, the latter – to be intended as the *corporeal* facts of our existence (Felluga 2015) – exerts some kind of biological influence on the determination of the former. It is almost as if biological sex naturally tends to mold gender, while however admitting that the construction of one's own gender identity can disregard one's biological sex in just as many cases, resulting in the separation of the two. To better grasp the complexity of this potential connection that might be established, the origin and domain to which these two concepts belong must be drawn. As the term suggests, sex has a biological basis, which can be explained as follows: "the human species, as well as other species having sexual reproduction, is divided into two major groups, males and females, with two bodies that differ from each other chromosomally, anatomically, and physiologically" (Ghigi 2019, 15).[1] Having determined that sex is exclusively biological in nature, gender is, instead, "its cultural elaboration, the product of the socialization process through which individuals learn what

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian sources are our own.

is necessary to properly interpret sexually defined roles. Speaking of gender thus refers to the social construction of sex […]" (Sartori 2009, 16). A further specification is found in the notion of gender identity, corresponding to the "deeply felt, inherent sense of being a girl, woman, or female; a boy, a man, or male; a blend of male or female; or an alternative gender" (APA 2015, 834), which can even change over time (Lev 2004).

The relationship between biological sex and gender is one that is hard to untangle. It can be intended as a relationship of mutual dependence that might lead to a full correspondence between the individual's gender identity and their biological sex. A mismatch between gender and biological sex is, however, a possibility that is to be equally contemplated. Indeed, the flexible, versatile nature of gender has long been advocated for by different social, gender justice movements, especially in recent years. In this view, gender "is not hard-wired and can be understood and expressed in a far more diverse range of ways" (Hines, Taylor 2018, 6), driving us beyond the boundaries imposed by gender binarism. This malleability of gender is reflected in the several different labels that have been coined to distinguish among this vast array of gender profiles, which serve as key definitions to orient the audience in the public debate: the term "genderfluid" points to the dimension of change over time and across different situations; "genderflux" refers to the level of intensity experienced by the individual; "gender-diverse" touches on the dimension of gender manifestation by addressing aspects such as physicality; "gender-queer" is a synonym for 'nonbinary' locating a person in between or outside the traditional categories of masculine and feminine; "agender" indicates absence or neutrality of gender (for a full list see Hines, Taylor 2018, 10-11). The forging of these novel categories made it possible to identify the actors who have enacted this profound change with respect to the perception of gender, affecting the political, social and linguistic sphere.

There is an equally complex interplay between language, society and politics. Language is a tool that acts in the world and contributes to the shaping of society (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023), which in turn modifies language in a relationship of mutual influence (Hoijer 1948). From a sociolinguistic perspective, this dynamic has been described as one in which "linguistic and social change are mutually constitutive" (Deumert 2006, 2138). However, within this process of continuous and reciprocal alteration which requires time, the socio-cultural change is hardly ever produced concurrent with the one discernable at the level of language. Indeed, for a nonspontaneous linguistic innovation to occur – one that is intentional and planned – its stabilization typically requires a prolonged phase of experimentation and negotiation, which hardly ever takes place simultaneously with the cultural or political revolution responsible for it. One can conduct

a revolution by adopting a linguistic practice, which will nevertheless need its own testing time and its temporary trajectory in order to eventually become established.

Language is certainly one of the fields where the battle for the advancement of gender rights is played out (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023). We are witnessing a public demand for the linguistic materialization of gender-related transformative instances (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023), one that is pervasive and sits on several modules of language. Advocates are not willing to settle for an expansion of vocabulary, they are rather calling for a collective action that strikes the grammatical gender. In so doing, they are introducing "a structural change in language, in its nerves, its framing" (Wittig 1985, 7), one that is at the root of a political conflict, since acting in the world – be it through language or other media – cannot be separated from doing politics (Lorusso, Serughetti 2023). It is only through a public, political commitment that an agreement can be reached in theory, marking a historic transition (Wittig 1985).

It is this frame that encloses the present research, which, from a psycholinguistic perspective, carries out an investigation aimed at deepening the relationship between gender identity as a social construct and its realization at the level of language, by pointing out the implications on the linguistic system while drawing the boundaries within which this relationship can grow. To this end, an experimental protocol was developed (adapting the one by Bradley et al. 2019) for the evaluation of the accessibility of *-ə* as the suffix representing the nonbinary population in the Italian language.

1.3 The Classification of Grammatical Gender Systems

Languages can be classified into three different types with respect to the grammatical category of gender: (i) no gender system languages, (ii) sex-based gender system languages, (iii) non-sex-based gender system languages (Corbett 2013b).

The linguistic category of gender "permeates the whole body of language" at various degrees depending on the language in question (Wittig 1985, 5). For a language to possess grammatical gender, Dixon (1982) identifies three main requirements that must be satisfied: (i) the grouping of nouns into classes; (ii) the grammatical agreement surfacing between the noun and its dependent functional or lexical words; (iii) a plausible semantic correlation between biological sex and class membership. The third requirement reflects one of the most vigorous considerations Monique Wittig made in her essay "The Mark of Gender" (1985, 5), namely that "gender is the enforcement of sex in language". This requirement is however not included in the definition later provided by Corbett (1991), as 25% of the languages

in his sample that have gender have an animacy-based rather than a sex-based system.

Grammatical gender performs several functions on both a syntactic and morphological level, contributing, to some extent, to language processing and disambiguation purposes. This applies at different levels of intensity according to the language's gender system.

Grammatical gender triggers agreement, namely, the syntactic process by which the gender of the noun, referred to as 'controller', determines the form of its modifiers, named 'targets' (Corbett 2006, 10-26). To illustrate, consider the Italian sentences *tutti i nostri nuovi allievi sono stati convocati* 'all.M.PL the.M.PL our.M.PL new.M.PL students.M.PL have been.M.PL summoned.M.PL' or *tutte le nostre nuove allieve sono state convocate* 'all.F.PL the.F.PL our.F.PL new.F.PL students.F.PL have been.F.PL summoned.F.PL', which display systematic gender agreement across the noun phrase and the predicate. Furthermore, gender marking facilitates reference tracking, by means of the agreement between antecedents and anaphoric pronouns, as well as helps solving misidentifications of the referent (Dye et al. 2017) (e.g., in Italian *Appena Gianni e Sandra sono arrivati, Maria ha parlato con lui* 'As soon as Gianni and Sandra arrived, Maria spoke to him'). Evidence suggests that "gender incongruence should lead to diminished encoding or recall" (Yorkston, De Mello 2005, 225), that is, it can impair both the encoding of linguistic information and its subsequent recall, by increasing cognitive processing demands and weakening the formation of stable mental representations. At the same time, the absence of gender marking implies the loss of several linguistic cues that play a crucial role in discourse processing, such as anaphora resolution and reference tracking. It is in light of these assumptions that proposals for transformation that go in the direction of 'zero marking' should be carefully evaluated.

Having established that grammatical gender, where present, is marked differently across languages, by assuming, for instance, a different number of grammatical gender values – up to seven in Swahili (Corbett 1991, 47, Table 3.4) – several classifications grouping together similar linguistic systems with respect to gender have been proposed (Hellinger, Bußmann 2001-03; Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, Laakso 2012). The recent taxonomic system devised by Gygax and colleagues (2019) profiles five different language groups:

1. Grammatical gender languages (e.g., French, Spanish, Czech, German, Italian);
2. Languages with a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender (e.g., Norwegian, Dutch);
3. Natural gender languages (e.g., English);
4. Genderless languages with a few traces of grammatical gender (e.g., Oriya, Basque);
5. Genderless languages (e.g., Turkish, Finnish).

We proceed by comparing groups (1) and (3). In languages belonging to group (1), all nouns have gender. For human nouns, there tends to be an almost exact match between the biological sex of the referent and the assigned grammatical gender (*la ragazza* 'the.F.SG girl.F.SG'; *il ragazzo* 'the.M.SG boy.M.SG'). On the contrary, the assignment of gender to inanimate nouns (*la sedia* 'the.F.SG chair.F.SG'; *il divano* 'the.M.SG sofa.M.SG') is "mostly semantically arbitrary" (Gygax et al. 2019, 3). In other words, for human nouns, gender assignment is primarily reality-driven, meaning it closely reflects the biological sex of the referent; in contrast, for inanimate nouns, gender assignment is conventional, based on linguistic and cultural conventions rather than semantic or biological factors.

In languages belonging to group (3), personal pronouns represent the only category marked for gender. In pronouns, gender assignment is dictated by the sex of the referent (e.g., *my professor - she, your professor - he*). Inanimate nouns, as well as the great majority of human nouns, are unspecified for gender (e.g., *accountant, doctor*).

In an attempt to draw a general trend in the process of grammatical gender assignment from a cross-linguistic perspective, one could affirm that the grammatical gender distinctions found in human nouns reflect biological sex distinctions, further reinforcing this tight relationship that seems to be exploited by grammar whenever possible. In statistical terms, just above 40% of the languages of the world display grammatical gender distinctions (Corbett 2013a). Out of those, 75% have a correlation between biological sex and grammatical gender (Corbett 2013b).

In the next section, we focus on the gender system of Italian, which belongs to the group of grammatical gender languages.

1.4 Gender Binarism in Italian

Italian is a language with a binary number system (singular and plural) and a binary gender system (masculine and feminine). Gender and number are functional features bundled together in an "abstract fused morpheme" which is expressed through a vocalic ending (Acquaviva 2009, 50), as (1.1) shows.

(1.1) a. *Ragazz-o* (M.SG) – *Ragazz-i* (M.PL)
'boy' – 'boys'
b. *Ragazz-a* (F.SG) – *Ragazz-e* (F.PL)
'girl' – 'girls'

Not only nouns (1.1), but many other categories exhibit gender marking in Italian: the lexical categories adjectives (e.g., *la donna ricca* 'the.F.SG woman.F.SG rich.F.SG'; *l'uomo ricco* 'the.M.SG

man.M.SG rich.M.SG') and past participles (e.g., *è ritornato* '[he] is got.back.M.SG'; *è ritornata* '[she] is got.back.F.SG'), and the functional categories articles, demonstratives, third-person accusative (i.e., *lo* 'him/it'; *la* 'her/it'; *li* 'them.M.PL'; *le* 'them.F.PL') and dative clitics (i.e., *gli* 'to.him'; *le* 'to.her'), third-person singular strong pronouns (i.e., *lui* 'he, him'; *lei* 'she, her'), and quantifiers (e.g., *certe finestre sono alte* 'some.F.PL windows.F.PL are tall.F.PL').[2] Possessive pronouns agree with the gender of the possessee (e.g., in *la sua casa è piccola* 'the.F.SG his/her.F.SG house.F.SG is small.F.SG', *sua* is feminine because the controller *casa* 'house' is feminine, regardless of the gender identity of the possessor).

By adopting a comparative approach with Spanish, the role of the vocalic endings becomes clearer. In Spanish, "stems require a class marker (CM) constituent in order to be morphologically well-formed free-standing words" (Harris 1996, 104), with the notion of 'class' referring to a set of inflectional realizations in morphology (Aronoff 1976). This also holds for Italian, where typically words require an unaccented end-vowel other than /u/ in order to be considered 'canonical' (Acquaviva 2009).[3] The stem with specified class is thus "phonologically realized as a form that ends in one of a set of canonical vowels, conditioned by the stem's class and by the features on the abstract agreement" (Acquaviva 2009, 55). It is therefore crucial to emphasize that the requirement for a vocalic ending should not be attributed to the overt realization of the features of gender and number; instead, its primary function is to satisfy a constraint governing the well-formedness of words. Unlike Spanish, however, which possesses a discrete morpheme to convey the number feature separately (cf. the plural *-s* suffix in (1.2)), Italian opts for the co-expression of the two features of gender and number in a single thematic end-vowel (cf. (1.1)) (Acquaviva 2009).

(1.2) a. *Caball-o* (M.SG) – *Caball-o-s* (M.PL)
'horse' – 'horses'
b. *Maripos-a* (F.SG) – *Maripos-a-s* (F.PL)
'butterfly' – 'butterflies'

2 Plural *loro*, which is both a strong nominative and accusative pronoun 'they, them' and a weak dative pronoun 'to.them', is not marked for gender and can refer to a male-only group, a female-only group, as well as a mixed-gender group.

3 There are, however, exceptions to this rule, which typically involve nasal and liquid consonants: functional words (e.g., *con* 'with', *per* 'for'), some names (e.g., *Carmen*, *Miriam*), and lexical loans (e.g., *bar* 'café', *lapis* 'pencil'). In addition, there are cases of words ending in accented vowels, such as *città* 'city', *caffè* 'coffee', *perché* 'because/why', *lì* 'there', *però* 'but', and *virtù* 'virtue'.

Word Markers in Italian determine the shape of words, regardless of their category. The list in (1.3), taken from Acquaviva (2009, 55), shows that the same word endings are used for nouns, verbs, and uninflected words:[4]

(1.3) Italian Word Markers: unaccented *-a*, *-e*, *-i*, *-o* (not *-u*), inflected and uninflected
- nominally inflected: *gatt-o*, *gatt-a*, *verd-i*, *quest-e*, *lett-in-o*, …
- verbally inflected: *cant-o*, *veng-a*, *potess-i*, *andar-e*, …
- uninflected: *prim-a* 'before', *doman-i* 'tomorrow', *quand-o* 'when',... (nominal, invariable: *lam-a* 'llama', *fot-o* 'photo',...)

Although not absolute, as there are some exceptions to this rule (e.g., verbal endings requiring stressed end-vowels such as *accadrà* 'it will happen', *berrò* 'I will drink'), this is a general criterion for word formation in Italian (Acquaviva 2009). In the process of noun formation, 70% of nouns are indeed assigned a specific end-vowel that can overtly discriminate between masculine and feminine, i.e., *-o vs -a* (Thornton, Iacobini, Burani 1994). These are phonologically transparent nouns as they allow for the immediate recovery of the gender information from the surface form (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011). The unaccented end-vowel *-o* conveys the masculine singular features (e.g., *parc-o* 'park'), whereas its plural form is formed with *-i*, as in *parch-i* 'parks'; feminine forms, on the other hand, carry *-a* as their vocalic ending (e.g., *tort-a* 'cake') and opt for *-e* to form the plural form (i.e., *tort-e* 'cakes') (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011). However, not all words fit into these two declensional classes (D'Achille, Thornton 2003; Stark 2007; Acquaviva 2009; Thornton 2009). In addition to the productive Class I and Class II, at least four more classes should be identified, as visualized in Table 1 taken from Acquaviva (2009, 50).

Table 1 Declensional classes in Italian (from Acquaviva 2009, 50)

Class I (all fem.)		**Class II (all masc. except one)**		**Class III (masc. and fem.)**	
sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.
-a	**-e**	**-o**	**-i**	**-e**	**-i**
donna	*donne*	*libro*	*libri*	*fiore*	*fiori*
Class IV (almost all masc.)		**Class V (all masc. → fem.)**		**Class VI (masc. and fem.)**	
sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.	sg. and pl.	
-a	-i	-o	-a	[invariable]	
poeta	*poeti*	*uovo*	*uova*	*bar, blu, koala,…*	

4 For uninflected words, Acquaviva does not provide an example like *sempr-e* 'always' with the vocalic ending *-e*.

Some masculine nouns happen to take on in their singular form the *-a* suffix generally employed to form feminine nouns. A case in point is the masculine *poet-a* 'poet.M.SG', belonging to Class IV. The corresponding plural form instead follows the more traditional rule by adopting the *-i* suffix, hence being fully classified as phonologically transparent (i.e., *poet-i* 'poets'). This is an instance of irregular inflection for gender, only visible in the singular form. The opposite trend can be observed on the feminine noun *man-o* 'hand.F.SG', formed with the *-o* suffix usually designating the masculine form. Here, unlike the previous case, the standard masculine suffix is also maintained in the formation of the plural of the feminine noun, resulting in *man-i* 'hands.F.PL'. This constitutes the only exception found in Class II **[tab. 1]**.[5] Note, also, that the plural *braccia* 'arms' reveals the traces of the original neuter Latin form in *-a*, in contrast with the regular plural form in *-i*.[6]

Focusing on the masculine-feminine opposition in human nouns, the approach adopted by Gygax and colleagues (2019) views the feminine forms as morphologically derived from the masculine ones via suffixation. The direction of the derivation cannot however always be reconstructed *a posteriori*; there are cases where it is not possible to determine which of the two forms (i.e., masculine or feminine) is actually derived (e.g., *bambin-o* 'child.M.SG', *bambin-a* 'child.F.SG'). For the purpose of our analysis, we follow Gygax and colleagues (2019) in assuming that the feminine form is derived from the masculine form.[7]

With regard to the functioning of the derivational processes, there are several paths that can be taken, resulting in more or less symmetrical masculine/feminine pairs. The forging of "structurally symmetric pairs" constitutes a viable building option creating two forms that are equally complex from a morphological point of view, by employing different suffixes (e.g., *postino* 'postman' – *postina* 'postwoman') (Gygax et al. 2019, Supplementary Material). Other regular suffixes are *-tore*.M, *-trice*.F as in *minatore* – *minatrice* 'miner'. The same applies to female names (e.g., *Paolo* – *Paola*). There are however, as reported in the Supplementary Material by Gygax and colleagues (2019), "competing feminine derivations" for the

5 Other feminine nouns ending in *-o* (cf. D'Achille, Thornton 2008) are invariable, e.g., *la moto* / *le moto* 'the.F.SG motorbike' / 'the.F.PL motorbike'.

6 Latin distinguished between masculine, feminine and neuter. Neuter nouns typically displayed syncretism between nominative and accusative forms and formed their plural in *-a* (e.g., *bracchium* 'arm' → *bracchia* 'arms'), a pattern that survives residually in some Italian plurals.

7 See D'Achille and Thornton 2003 for the hypothesis that nouns like *bambino* 'child.M.SG' and *bambina* 'child.F.SG' belong to two different word classes, and there is no derivation of the feminine from the masculine.

same masculine noun, some of which can be negatively connotated (e.g., *avvocatessa* 'lawyer.F' as opposed to *avvocata* 'lawyer.F', which presents the same morphological structure as *avvocato* 'lawyer.M'). Complete morphological asymmetry is found instead in the so-called fixed-gender nouns: masculine/feminine pairs whose components do not share any common roots (e.g., *fratello* 'brother' – *sorella* 'sister'; *marito* 'husband' – *moglie* 'wife'; *toro* 'bull' – *mucca* 'cow').

Some derivational suffixes – alternatively identified as neoclassical combining elements – that are unmarked for gender in the singular form are also present in Italian (e.g., *-ista* as in *attivista* 'activist'; *-cida* as in *omicida* 'murderer'; *-iatra* as in *pediatra* 'pediatrician'; *-nauta* as in *astronauta* 'astronaut'). Nouns formed with these suffixes are referred to as common-gender nouns, defined as "phonologically opaque" (De Martino, Bracco, Laudanna 2011, 749), and can only be disambiguated by means of the determiner (e.g., *il/la pediatra* 'the.M/F.SG pediatrician'). Finally, for some animal-denoting nouns, only one form is lexically specified; the opposite sex is expressed by means of a lexical gender modifier (e.g., *il tasso femmina* 'female badger' and *la tigre maschio* 'male tiger', Gheno 2020a). An analogous strategy is also attested with human referents, as in *l'architetto donna* 'the architect.M.SG woman' or *la donna architetto* 'the.F.SG woman architect.M.SG'. Note that these cases are controversial, as an alternative is available and preferred in Italian: *l'architetta* 'the.F.SG architect.F.SG'.

It can be argued that in the vast majority of cases, except for those suffixes unspecified for gender, it is the singular form that dictates the gender of the noun (Corbett 1991). Gender distinctions are then maintained in the plural forms (Gygax et al. 2019), accounting for a steady relationship between the two features (i.e., gender and number).

As anticipated, the morphological derivation system generally follows a specific trajectory: from masculine to feminine. Only in rare cases does the opposite occur, as in Italian *vedovo* 'widower' derived from *vedova* 'widow' (Corbett 1991; Maiden, Robustelli 2000) or *modello* 'runway model.M.SG' derived from *modella* 'runway model.F.SG', as suggested by an anonymous reviewer. This pattern (masculine-to-feminine derivation) is also observable in other languages, including French (e.g., *acteur* → *actrice*) (Riegel, Pellat, Rioul 2009).

The predominance of masculine-to-feminine derivation contributes to the perception of the masculine form's primacy and dominance over the feminine. Even before analyzing derivational mechanisms, this asymmetry is evident in the masculine form's capacity to supposedly trigger a double interpretation (universal/generic *vs* specific), which the feminine form does not evoke – a phenomenon further discussed in the next section.

1.5 The Masculine Form's Tilted Ambiguity: From Generic to Specific Bias

When reading a text, the encounter with a masculine form may give rise to conflicting interpretations. Depending on whether it is a singular or a plural form, the situation may change drastically. After all, the plural denotes many subjectivities, with their various characteristics (e.g., different gender identities). The singular conversely entails one subjectivity (i.e., one single gender identity), hence supposedly raising less doubts as to the actual characteristics of the person. As to say, there seems to be less room for ambiguity with the singular. Yet, its linguistic context and accompanying elements could still cause confusion and interfere in the process of inferring gender – an example of this will be reported and commented shortly in (1.5b).

Ambiguity arises at the level of meaning activation, as two possible interpretations become available to the individual, who is eventually called to disambiguate between a specific/exclusive and a generic/inclusive meaning (Gygax et al. 2021).[8] The specific meaning of the masculine form is activated when an exclusive correspondence with men is assumed, i.e., the referent is conceived as either a man or a group of men. The generic meaning implies non-male participants as well. In other words, the masculine form is used 'generically' when the gender of the referent is unknown, nonbinary or the group composition we are referring to is of a mixed nature with respect to gender, hence turning into a multifunctional versatile masculine (Formato 2018; Formato, Somma 2023), eventually even designating women. The fact remains that both interpretations (specific *vs* generic) are "connected through their common inclusion of the male gender" (Gygax et al. 2021, 5).

The study conducted by Gygax and colleagues (2021) precisely sets out to explore the general implications arising from the semantic ambiguity of the masculine form when referring to humans, by looking at a multitude of languages (cf. Giusti 2024). As a matter of fact, this intrinsic duality has been attested across different languages, regardless of their gender systems. Sentence (1.4) in French, from Gygax et al. (2021, 6), presupposes the selection of the generic meaning, since the conveyed intention of the female subject of the sentence is that of talking to someone working in the surgical staff,

8 The terms 'specific' and 'generic' may give rise to terminological ambiguity, as they are widely used to contrast reference to a particular individual (e.g., *I am looking for Mary*) with non-specific reference (e.g., *I am looking for a surgeon*). Here, however, the terms are understood differently in combination with 'exclusive/inclusive', to capture whether masculine forms are interpreted as referring specifically/exclusively to men or generically to mixed-gender groups, hence inclusively.

and whether that person is a female, nonbinary or a male surgeon is absolutely irrelevant.

(1.4) *Elle voulait discuter avec un chirurgien*.M
'She wanted to talk to a surgeon.'

It is safe to say that the gender information retrieved from *chirurgien* 'male surgeon' does not represent a crucial characteristic for the purpose of identifying the person sought by the subject. In fact, it may very well be ignored since its use is meant to include, in this specific instance, potentially different gender identities, as none is meant to prevail over the other. The use of the masculine form is therefore intended to be generic, as to say inclusive, in that it does not necessarily refer exclusively to a male surgeon; a female or nonbinary surgeon are equally contemplated here. Note that the same word (i.e., *surgeon*) in (1.5) (from Gygax et al. 2021, 1, 3) in a natural gender language (i.e., English) where – as described in Section 1.3 – the great majority of human nouns is unspecified for gender, still raises the question of this double interpretation, despite the word lacking an overt manifestation of the gender information. It follows that the source of this uncertainty must be located outside the linguistic context.

(1.5) a. The surgeons passed their exams.
b. The surgeon passed the exam and cried.

In comparing (1.5a) and (1.5b), we realize how much we were actually taking for granted the male gender assignment to the word *surgeons*, hence picturing a team of exclusively male surgeons. Even though the noun is unmarked for gender, and cannot be formally recognized as a masculine form, it seems to activate a referent with a specific, male gender. As in the case of French (1.4), however, the noun in (1.5a) is intentionally employed to refer to the collectivity of surgeons, regardless of their gender. Yet, the awareness of an automatic male-gender attribution comes to us the moment we are confronted with sentence (1.5b), which attributes to the subject of the sentence (i.e., *surgeon*) – in all likelihood assumed to be a man – a typically 'feminine' action (i.e., crying) – or at least long-depicted as such by the collective narrative.[9] This juxtaposition can trigger a mild sense

9 We would like to emphasize that we, as authors, by no means intend to confine the action of weeping to the female category alone. In illustrating this reasoning, we are simply appealing to a tendency detectable in the collective imagination that has been much discussed, which misses no opportunity to attribute weeping to a female agent, even though men are equally capable and absolutely entitled to weep. Think of the outdated 'don't cry like a sissy' when scolding a male child.

of disorientation in the reader, who is now suddenly forced to consider the option of looking at a female referent, as the information provided by the verb *crying* clashes with that of the presumably male subject. One possibility to find our way around sentence (1.5b) is for us to abandon the specific interpretation that sees the exclusive activation of the male gender, and assume its generic function of possibly including a female surgeon. If, on the contrary, the presumably male surgeon's performance of crying did not raise any doubts whatsoever (i.e., in picturing a crying male surgeon), the specific interpretation is more likely to stay active (Gygax et al. 2021), thus decreeing the selection of the specific meaning, i.e., male surgeon.

There are however reasons to believe that the juxtaposition of the word *surgeon* with the verb *crying* could be perceived as some sort of misplacement, giving evidence of two, relatively unrelated aspects: (i) "gender as a spontaneous inference" (Gygax et al. 2021, 1); (ii) the steady relationship between a specific gender and a role noun – a concept known as 'gender stereotypicality', indicating the likelihood of human nouns to refer to women or men, which will be further explored later on. With reference to (i), (1.5) is an instance that proves that readers naturally tend to process the gender of the subject of the sentence (i.e., the surgeon's gender) "and include it as part of their mental representation of the text" even when there is no gender cue available at the surface of the word and, most importantly, is not needed to achieve "a coherent representation of the sentence" (Gygax et al. 2021, 1-2). In the case of the singular (1.5b), the confusion arising from the activation of the gender information is produced by the presence of the surrounding words, in particular the verb *crying* combined with the supposedly male *surgeon*. It was assumed that the latter, in the collective imagination, cannot fail to be a man, and his weeping can be harder to imagine.

When gender is visible, as shown in (1.4) for French and (1.6) below for Italian, the visual hook provided by the noun appearing in the masculine form and its dependent functional words – also inflected for the masculine – only reinforces the preference for the exclusive masculine interpretation, with no distinction as to number features. The choice of a male referent is favored over a mixed one, even when, in the intentions of the writer or speaker, other subjectivities should be included.

(1.6) a. *I medici dovranno prendere parte a un corso di aggiornamento nel fine settimana*.
'Doctors must attend a refresher course on the weekend'
b. *La terapia individuata dal medico ha portato alla guarigione del paziente*.
'The treatment advised by the doctor led to the patient's recovery.'

As a matter of fact, *i medici* 'the.M.PL doctors.M.PL' in (1.6a) should be understood as referring to a composite of women, men and nonbinary

people, meaning everyone who is working as a physician. Yet the reader could be tempted to picture only male doctors. In a similar way, it is not known whether the physician in (1.6b) is of female, nonbinary or male gender; nonetheless, the reader is expected to be more prone to once again trace the action of the suggested treatment back to a male doctor. This interpretative possibility could also be framed as the product of 'gender stereotypicality' (ii), representing a nonlinguistic factor defined as "the generalized beliefs or expectations about whether a specific (social or occupational) role is more likely to be held by one gender or the other" (Misersky et al. 2014, 842). Extensive research in social psychology (e.g., Banaji, Hardin 1996) and psycholinguistics (e.g., Oakhill, Garnham, Reynolds 2005) has been conducted on the topic, revealing that readers automatically rely on stereotypes upon encountering role nouns (Misersky et al. 2014). Both grammatical gender and gender stereotypes have indeed been found to influence the process of ascribing gender to denote persons (Irmen, Roßberg 2004), both contributing to the molding of the corresponding mental representation. Note that *chirurgien* 'surgeon.M.SG' (1.4) and *medico* 'doctor.M.SG' (1.6) are stereotypically male nouns – just like *surgeon* (1.5) – which also exhibit inherent masculine gender inflection, hence providing access to a distinctive gender cue. An interaction between linguistic (i.e., grammatical gender) and nonlinguistic (i.e., gender stereotype) factors thus originates. The processing of this interaction induces with even greater force the prevalence of a male-biased mental representation in correspondence of gender-marked stereotypical nouns (Irmen, Roßberg 2004). The absence of gender markers in English (1.5) makes the stereotypicality of the role noun the only bias responsible for strongly influencing speakers' mental representations (Gygax et al. 2021).

Having identified a margin of preference in terms of meaning activation for grammatical gender languages, this does not however negate that the generic masculine could still be activated; for instance, in cases where the presence of a verb inherently associated with the female world points to the generic interpretation, preventing an unambiguous identification with the male gender to take place (e.g., *Il chirurgo piange per aver passato l'esame* 'the.M.SG surgeon.M.SG cries over passing the exam'; cf. (1.5b)). It is thus safe to say that the masculine form may have an ambiguous referent that needs to be decoded by the reader's cognitive system (Irmen, Kurovskaja 2010). Evidence shows that the activation of the opposition *specific vs generic meaning* brought about by the masculine form triggers greater cognitive effort in the solving of the semantic ambiguity (Gygax et al. 2021). Disambiguation must indeed occur in order to reach a coherent mental representation, required for each of the conveyed information we read (van den Broek et al. 1999; Graesser,

Singer, Trabasso 1994). Among the two possible alternatives (i.e., specific/exclusive or generic/inclusive reference), as can be easily guessed from the reasoning provided above, recent studies demonstrate that the male-specific interpretation is the dominant one: "the specific meaning dictates readers' interpretation of the masculine form" (Gygax et al. 2021, 5).

One of the reasons underlying the unequal distribution across its possible interpretations is to be found in meaning frequency (Gygax et al. 2021). In polysemic words, meaning frequency correlates with predictability and corresponds to the rate at which one meaning is activated over time. The acquisitional factor is assumed to have contributed to regulating this process of activation. As a matter of fact, there is extensive literature showing that children acquire the Italian gender system and its two gender values at a very early stage (Velnić 2020), thus unconsciously gaining access first to the specific meaning of the masculine form in a non-mediated way. In the study conducted by Velnić (2020), the youngest child to display mastery of this two-way gender system is indeed 2;6 years old, confirming indirectly that the masculine form is supposedly used only to refer to boys/men and the feminine form only to girls/women, hence enforcing, at least initially, an exclusive and fixed binary correspondence. Only later along the developmental trajectory are children supposedly introduced to the possibility of the generic masculine. The generic use indeed enters the scene with much delay and must soon come to terms with the fact that the specific/exclusive use has long been established, hence extensively implemented. In addition, longer exposure to the specific use (i.e., temporal precedence) can in turn contribute to boosting its meaning frequency. Therefore, meaning frequency and temporal precedence combined are deemed responsible for causing the more salient meaning to correspond to the specific meaning. Typological studies support the validity of this argument by reporting that the specific-generic learning sequence has been observed in many – if not all – different languages that provide both meanings (Gygax et al. 2009).

A cross-linguistic comparative perspective has further led to the identification of an "*asymmetrical treatment* of women and men" across different languages (Pauwels 2003, 553). Having clarified that the masculine form has the alleged ability to incorporate other genders (e.g., the female gender) by claiming their, albeit covert, representation through the selection of the generic meaning, the masculine is thus openly recognized as more general as opposed to the feminine. One needs only consider that the mere presence of a single man among a group of women imposes the selection of the masculine form (Gygax et al. 2021). It is well known that the masculine form has long taken the shape of the default value. Everything that deviates from the masculine, such as the feminine, becomes

particular, in a way 'marked'. This awareness leads to the emergence of a more complex opposition, one that sees the masculine embodying the universal in contrast to the particular embedded in the feminine. The same polarity is addressed by Wittig in positing that "the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves [...] and gender by enforcing upon women a particular category represents a measure of domination" (Wittig 1985, 5-6). The same hierarchical relationship is deconstructed by Pauwels (2003, 553) in the following passage by piecing together elements from male generics, morphological derivation and the lexical category of role nouns:

> The practice of considering the man/the male as the prototype for human representation reduces the woman/female to the status of the "subsumed," the "invisible," or the "marked" one: women are invisible in language when they are subsumed in generic expressions using masculine forms. Generic reference in many languages occurs via the use of forms which are identical with the representation of maleness (e.g. *he* as generic and masculine pronoun, generic nouns coinciding with nouns referring to males). When women are made visible in language, they are "marked": their linguistic construction is often as a derivative of man/male through various grammatical (morphological) processes. This asymmetry also affects the lexical make-up of many languages. The structure of the lexicon often reflects the "male as norm" principle through the phenomenon of lexical gaps, that is, the absence of words to denote women in a variety of roles, professions, and occupations (e.g. Baron 1986; Hellinger 1990; Sabatini 1985; Yaguello 1978).

The disadvantaged position in which women have always found themselves – compared to the one attained by men – is thus still detectable at multiple levels of the language (e.g., morpho-syntactic, lexical…). Over the last decades, feminist battles have allowed for the improvement of women's linguistic recognition in granting them, in most cases, an identifiable autonomous presence in language. The underlying processes that led to this result are however still questionable, and even more so the idea that female recognition in language comes from an operation of abstraction that nonetheless moves from the centrality of men.

Furthermore, all these reflections about the secondary nature of the feminine form in no way take into account those minorities who lie outside gender binarism. Such minorities are in fact seeking to be represented in the language system by suggesting new forms of gender marking: either an independent 'third form', specifically designating that class, or a single, unifying, common form. The

latter case would mark not only the disappearance of the dominant masculine category, but also that of the longed-for feminine one.

Chapter 2 is precisely devoted to this topic, namely an overview of all the strategies designed to claim visibility at the level of language. Whether they go in the direction of adding new suffixes or reducing to a single word-ending, the side-effects are easily predictable: on the one hand, encapsulating a multitude of minorities under a single suffix can be perceived as a limitation, which does not ensure adequate representation; on the other hand, the risk of a proliferation of forms is that none ends up being adopted because there are too many possible alternatives, causing much fuss.

2 Bucking the Trend: From Marking to Neutralizing the Difference

Index 2.1 Introduction. – 2.2 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Available in Italian. – 2.3 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Across Different Languages.

2.1 Introduction

Two opposing trends can be detected within the set of proposed linguistic innovations specifically designed to respect each gender identity: "visibility of each gender *vs* neutralization of each gender" (Thornton 2022, 35).[1] While some languages seem to maintain the visibility of each gender as the preferred strategy, speakers of several languages are witnessing the transition from visibility to

1 Here we adopted the dichotomy proposed by Thornton 2022, which sees the juxtaposition of the terms *visibility* and *neutralization*. Other terms are also used in the literature. Murelli 2024 posits the *equality-inclusion* dichotomy, where visibility coincides with equality (also at a nonlinguistic level) and neutralization with inclusion intended as the omission of any gender specification. Riccio 2024 instead appeals to the *visibility-generalization of gender* dichotomy.

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/002

neutralization, as in the case of the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* for Italian, the focus of our study. The suffix *-ə* "went from being adopted to give visibility to nonbinary gender identities to being used to neutralize all gender distinctions, encompassing in a single form women, men and people with nonbinary identities" (Thornton 2022, 35). The output of such a process appears to coincide with the employment of the suffix *-e* in Spanish by a broad community of users (Stetie, Zunino 2022), as we shall see in detail in the following pages.

The increasing overshadowing of minorities hiding in an indistinct "multitude" (Giusti 2022, 16) is however a source of frustration for those who are not prepared to abandon the linguistic visibility that they are obtaining after years of hardships and struggle. This is particularly true for speakers who could experience full recognition at the level of language, as the feminine value is provided for by the language system *per se* (e.g., in Italian and Spanish). Hence, a substantial difference soon emerges between the female group – which is immediately tied back to an existing specific declension class, whose prototypical declensional ending corresponds to *-a* (e.g., in Italian and Spanish) – and the nonbinary minority, which does not yet possess a dedicated linguistic form that is compatible with the language system called upon to accommodate it. If the feminine tends to enjoy a linguistic status, at times compromised as a consequence of deliberately omitting its distinctive forms, the nonbinary is not yet traceable to an unambiguous form that has gained as much credibility. This trend can be observed across the great majority of languages. One notable exception is Swedish, which seems to have found a viable solution by forging the third gender-neutral pronoun *hen* for human referents of unknown, undetectable or nonbinary gender (cf. Section 2.3). A shift in *usage* is thus needed to give equal representation to women, whereas a shift in the *system* is required to ensure equal representation to nonbinary people (Thornton 2022). As explained by Thomason (2007, 45), the linguistic possibility of a deliberate change "is settled as soon as a single speaker produces a single instance of the change at a single time. Whether a deliberate change will become a permanent part of […] the speech community as a whole is then a matter of social and linguistic probability, not possibility". Therefore, while a change has been proposed for the Italian language, i.e., the innovative suffix *-ə* designating referents of unknown, unspecified or nonbinary gender, its grip on reality is still in doubt.

Within this framework, the most recent proposals entailing insertion of special characters as suffixes – ranging from punctuation marks to orthographic markers – will be reviewed, along with their major limitations, in a cross-linguistic comparative perspective. Specifically, Section 2.2 focuses on the "degendering strategies" (Pires 2020, 116) as well as those overtly targeting visibility

(i.e., *regendering*) in Italian, whilst Section 2.3 presents virtuous gender-neutral as well as gender-fair examples attested in other languages.

2.2 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Available in Italian

2.2.1 Institutional and Academic Guidelines

Far from obtaining official guidance on the appropriate use of linguistic strategies to refer to others without specifying their gender, we are used to relying on vademecums outlining the strategies that are gaining momentum, which are, for this reason, deemed the most trusted sources to date. A number of prestigious institutions at the national level have taken a stance on the matter, by redacting distinct vademecums which share several points.[2] The world of academia, in particular, has been exhibiting great commitment in the scrupulous selection of linguistic strategies enhancing gender differences, as reflected in the documents (Statutes, Regulations, and Codes) drafted by 91 Italian Universities gathered in the *Corpus Normativo Universitario* (CNU) created by Riccio (2024). The corpus-based analysis conducted by Riccio indeed confirmed the employment of strategies that either emphasize gender visibility or favor the use of gender-neutral formulations,[3] roughly coinciding with those introduced by the very first set of recommendations produced by Alma Sabatini in the volume entitled *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* 'Sexism in the Italian language'. The aim of the document was to denounce the fact that the Italian language "is based on an androcentric principle" (Sabatini 1987, 24) undermining female representation in language. Sabatini's work was thus targeting a purely 'female inclusion' (De Cesare, Giusti 2024): there was no room for other gender identities or subjectivities to be recognized in their own specificity – making women visible was the only prerogative at the time.

2 At the national level, see Giorcelli et al. 2015; Regione Emilia-Romagna 2015; MIUR 2018; Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna 2020; Università Ca' Foscari Venezia 2022. At the international level, the European Parliament issued in 2008 *Gender-Neutral Language in the European Parliament*, which provides a set of directives aimed at promoting gender-neutral language and was translated into all the official languages of the European Union.

3 The quantitative analysis shows that the masculine forms *studente* 'student.M.SG' and *studenti* 'students.M.PL' are significantly more frequent than their female counterparts (i.e., *studentessa* 'student.F.SG'; *studentesse* 'students.F.PL'), confirming the widespread tendency to resort to an unmarked masculine (Riccio 2024, 36, 51).

In offering practical solutions declined in each context, the so-called *sdoppiamento* 'doubling' or 'splitting' (De Cesare 2022a) was deemed the most effective as it features the co-presence of a feminine and a masculine term in their extended or contracted forms (e.g., *studentesse e studenti* 'students.F.PL and students.M.PL'; *cari/e tutti/e* 'dear.M.PL/F.PL all.M.PL/F.PL'). Sabatini's work also contributed to bringing into focus specific uses that are to be avoided whenever possible, such as the unmarked masculine (e.g., the generic value of *uomo* 'man' in *rapporto uomo-macchina* 'man-machine relationship'), the inclusive masculine (e.g., *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL'), and the masculine agreement (e.g., *i bambini e le bambine vengono sempre rimproverati* 'boys and girls are always being scolded.M.PL'), to name a few.

An alternative to masculine agreement is found in *closest conjunct agreement*, according to which the coordination of two nouns of a different gender requires that the adjective or past participle referring to both agrees in gender and number with the closest noun (e.g., *i bambini e le bambine vengono sempre rimproverate* 'boys and girls are always being scolded.F.PL') (Giusti 2022). In putting the feminine first by trying to alternate the order of appearance in oppositional pairs (e.g., *donne e uomini* 'women and men' in place of *uomini e donne* 'men and women') (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2015, 12), however, the feminine noun, appearing first, would lose its influence on the mechanism of agreement.

With reference to the inclusive masculine, it is noteworthy that the latter is a defining strategy of the communication style adopted by the national academic environment, with the exception of a few universities (e.g., Università IUAV di Venezia 2023) that have specifically chosen to pursue a gender-fair language policy in defense of all of those who advocate for something that goes beyond gender binarism.[4]

Provided that one cannot always avoid all words that have only clearly masculine suffixes, the majority of female researchers are

4 In "Linee guida per una comunicazione inclusiva e accessibile" 'Guidelines for inclusive and accessible communication' (2023), available at the link `https://www.iuav.it/sites/default/files/2024-04/linee_guida_comunicazione_inclusiva_accessibile.pdf`, the committee responsible for the drafting directed their attention not only to female visibility but also to nonbinary visibility, by explicitly mentioning symbols such as the asterisk or *-ə*. The actual recommended context of use is however in doubt, as two different indications are reported: (i) "If allowed by the context (e.g., non-institutional email, chat), designations such as *-ə* or asterisk can be used. However, these designations present accessibility problems, so it is recommended to use them carefully. For rules on the use of *-ə*, in particular, you can consult `www.italianoinclusivo.it`"; (ii) "for a gender-sensitive language you should employ *-ə* and other symbols as long as you pay attention to the issue of accessibility and readability" (2023, 11, 14). According to this second point, it appears that such use is allowed without being limited to non-institutional contexts.

still inclined to personally choose to be called *ricercatore/ricercatori* 'researcher.M.SG/PL' precisely because the masculine labels boast a long-standing, more prestigious tradition and firm steadiness (Giorcelli et al. 2015; Voghera, Vena 2016). In so doing, they act driven by the illusion of obtaining more solid recognition. Giorgia Meloni's decision to be called *il Presidente del Consiglio* 'the.M.SG Prime Minister.SG' – framed as an instance of *occupational prestige* (Crawley 2014) – attracted considerable attention, as identifying with a male referent confirms the well-established preference for using the masculine for high-ranking offices (i.e., *maschile di prestigio*, a term used in e.g., Giusti 2022; De Cesare, Giusti 2024; Giusti 2024). This choice amplified the phenomenon, given Meloni's extensive media exposure and political power. Intentionally using the masculine further increases its frequency, reinforcing the trend while the feminine becomes increasingly marginalized (Giusti 2024). Not by chance, "discredit is not fought by avoiding the term in the feminine, but rather by using it in contexts of prestige" (Giusti 2024, 104). Using the term in the masculine is a choice that responds to social and cultural dynamics that are deeply rooted in our tradition, which does not however abide by the rules of Italian grammar, as pointed out by Robustelli (2012) in her "Linee guida per l'uso del genere nel linguaggio amministrativo" 'Guidelines for the use of gender in administrative language'. Robustelli's claim is that profession nouns should behave like any other noun, instead of receiving a special treatment, meaning that the grammatical gender of profession nouns should coincide with the biological sex of the referent (i.e., *la ministra* 'the.F.SG minister.F.SG' as opposed to *la ministro* 'the.F.SG minister.M.SG'). There is no "structural reason" to avoid using feminine role nouns, since grammar provides for them just as it does with the masculine (Arcangeli 2024); in fact, "the language naturally produces the feminine form" (Giusti 2024, 104). As Giusti observes, supporting this practice should be dictated by the need to avoid having to deal with "ungrammatical sentences like *Il direttore è stanca* ['the.M.SG director.M.SG is tired.F.SG'], or difficult to interpret such as *Il direttore è arrivato. ##Era stanca* ['the.M.SG director.M.SG is arrived.M.SG. ##[She] was tired.F.SG']" (Giusti 2022, 17). These structures are particularly detrimental to learners in a L2 acquisition context as they "would impair the formation of the linguistic competence relative to the distribution of grammatical gender inflection in Italian" (Giusti 2024, 106).

With respect to the use of the suffix *-essa*, conflicting positions emerge. Owing to its earliest derogatory meaning, the suffix *-essa* (e.g., *sindachessa* 'mayor.F.SG'; *deputatessa* 'deputy.F.SG') should be spared from the process of noun derivation altogether, as argued by Sabatini (1987). Contrary to Sabatini's (1987) recommendation, Robustelli (2012) urges her readers to keep the long-standing forms

in *-essa*, e.g., *dottoressa* 'doctor.F.SG', *professoressa* 'professor.F.SG', because of their linguistic tradition and the fact that the negative connotation that had marked them in the past has been removed by now.[5] A virtuous example of how an originally disparaging term has regained its prestige through use is precisely *dottoressa* 'doctor.F.SG' (Giusti 2024).

In light of all these observations, Robustelli (2012, 21-2) lists the strategies available to replace the inclusive masculine: (i) the feminine-gender visibility strategy involving symmetrical use of gender, echoing the above-mentioned doubling technique (De Cesare 2022a), whose outcome is known as "binomials" (Pires 2020, 111) (2.1a); (ii) the strategy of obscuring both genders by means of periphrases that include expressions without gender reference (2.1b), (iii) collective nouns (2.1c) or (iv) relative and indefinite pronouns (2.1d).

(2.1) a. *Tutti i consiglieri e tutte le consigliere prendano posto nell'aula*
'All councilmen and councilwomen take their seat'
b. *Persona, essere umano, individuo, soggetto*
'Person, human being, individual, subject'
c. *Personale dipendente/docente, magistratura, direzione, corpo docente, segreteria*
'Teaching personnel/staff, judiciary, directorate, teaching body, administrative office'
d. *Chiunque arrivi in ritardo…*
'Whoever gets here late'

At the level of syntax, Robustelli (2012, 22) promotes the passive form (2.2a), which allows for the omission of the agent, as well as the impersonal *si*-form (2.2b).[6]

(2.2) a. *La domanda deve essere presentata*
'the application must be submitted'
in place of
I cittadini e le cittadine devono presentare la domanda
'the.M.PL citizens.M.PL and the.F.PL citizens.F.PL must submit the application'
b. *Si entra uno alla volta*
'entrance is allowed one.M.SG at a time'
in place of
Gli utenti devono entrare uno alla volta
'the.M.PL visitors.M.PL must enter one.M.SG at a time'

5 On the historical use of the suffix *-essa*, also see De Cesare 2021; 2022b.

6 In (2.2b), the masculine form *uno* 'one.M.SG' is still marked for gender. Using the epicene *persona* 'person' instead would yield a fully unmarked alternative, as in *Si entra una persona alla volta* 'entrance is allowed one person at a time'.

Equally common strategies typically found in forms to fill out are the "abbreviated double form" employing "separation signs" (Elmiger 2008, 130-1), also known as the above-mentioned 'splitting' (2.3a), often accused of "producing redundancy and complexity in discourse" (Giusti 2022, 10), and epicenes as well as common-gender nouns (2.3b) (Giorcelli et al. 2015).

(2.3) a. *Il/La sottoscritto/a* 'the.M/F.SG undersigned.M/F.SG'
b. *La persona coinvolta* 'the.F.SG person.F.SG involved.F.SG',
La vittima accusata di… 'the.F.SG victim.F.SG charged.F.SG with…',
Gentile collega 'dear.SG colleague.SG', *Firma docente* 'lecturer.SG's signature'

Although not all scholars distinguish between epicenes and common-gender nouns, as explained by Thornton (2022), the former have a single form and are accompanied by a single, fixed article, although they can refer to individuals of any gender (e.g., *la persona* 'the.F.SG person.F.SG'; *la vittima* 'the.F.SG victim.F.SG'); the latter also have a single form, yet they are accompanied by the article indicating the gender of the referent (e.g., *il collega / la collega* 'the.M.SG / the.F.SG colleague.SG'; *il docente / la docente* 'the.M.SG / the.F.SG lecturer.SG'). Moreover, the dative clitic *gli* (cf. Section 1.4) has expanded its contexts of use by replacing, even in less formal writing, the feminine counterpart *le* and the plural *loro*, as the result of losing the specification for the features of gender and number (Cardinaletti 2004; Ballarè 2020; D'Achille 2021). Feminine singular *le* and plural dative *loro* are now confined to formal contexts.

2.2.2 Bottom-Up Innovations

Turning now to the proposals made in non-institutional contexts, the most common procedure seems to be "the adoption or resemanticization of individual characters" (Pires 2020, 115). This practice is far from new, boasting, indeed, a rather long tradition. Particular characters were in fact suggested by some men of letters in an effort to *update* the language and shorten the distance between the graphic form and the corresponding pronunciation (Antonelli 2021). Various attempts at graphic innovation over the centuries include the introduction by Leon Battista Alberti of the Latin *-æ* to signal the open *-e* [ɛ] as well as *-ao* to indicate the open *-o* [ɔ]; the use of the Greek letters epsilon (*-ε*) and omega (*-ω*) to distinguish open from closed vowels was instead proposed by Gian Giorgio Trissino (see Antonelli 2021 for a review). Looking at the proposals accumulated over the centuries, there is a tendency to use symbols originating in other domains and assign them a new linguistic function. A similar intervention, yet moved by different intentions,

has suggested a comparable contemporary trend that is gaining momentum. Special characters are indeed being selected to substitute a word's final vowel representing the morpheme that conveys gender and number features precisely to manipulate such values (Murelli 2024). By having the vowel replaced with special characters, the information concerning the gender and number of a given element is either lost (Murelli 2024) – and with it any immediate automatic assumption as to the referent's gender – or takes on new guises, more representative ones. An account of today's most widely implemented characters acquiring a gender-driven additional meaning is provided by Comandini's (2021) "Corpus of Gender Neutralization Strategies in Italian" (CoGeNSI), a collection of informal communications published on Facebook pages covering LGBTQIA+ topics. This is a platform hosting a rather favorable environment for the multiplication of spontaneous writings lacking any editorial filter, thus encouraging socially oriented linguistic experimentation, while also contributing to making spelling standards increasingly vague as a side effect (Antonelli 2021).

A total of 320 instances of gender neutralization/visibility strategies were identified in the corpus. Table 2 (adapted from Comandini 2021, 51) shows that the asterisk (2.4a) and the suffix *-ə* (2.4b) exhibit the highest frequency of occurrence, appearing 133 times (42%) and 129 times (40%), respectively. Much less frequent are the *-u* suffix (2.4c), with 34 occurrences (11%), the *-x* suffix (2.4d), with 18 occurrences (5%), and the 'at' sign (@) (2.4e), with only 6 occurrences (2%). The underscore (_) (2.4f) was not detected; nor were the following: -+ (2.4g), *-y* (2.4h), *-œ* (2.4i), together with the omission of the final vowel (2.4j), listed by Gheno (2020b) as other possible options. This wide range of graphic solutions can be explained in terms of natural sociolinguistic variability, which provides for a plurality of options available, and not just one single rule (Sgroi 2020).

Table 2 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the listed gender neutralization strategies (adapted from Comandini 2021, 51)

Strategy	**'*'**	**'ə'**	**'u'**	**'x'**	**'@'**	**Tot.**
Number of occurrences	133	129	34	18	6	320
%	42%	40%	11%	5%	2%	100%

In (2.4), sentences taken from the CoGeNSI corpus (Comandini 2021, 55) are reported and adapted to provide an example for each of the gender neutralization strategies mentioned so far:

(2.4) a. *Mi* figli* è un* liber* soggettività*
b. *Miə figliə è unə liberə soggettività*

c. *Miu figliu è unu liberu soggettività*
d. *Mix figlix è unx liberx soggettività*
e. *Mi@ figli@ è un@ liber@ soggettività*
f. *Mi_ figli_ è un_ liber_ soggettività*
g. *Mi+ figli+ è un+ liber+ soggettività*
h. *Miy figliy è uny libery soggettività*
i. *Miæ figliæ è unæ liberæ soggettività*
j. *Mi- figli- è un- liber- soggettività*
'My child is a free subjectivity'

In addition to the most common 'egalitarian asterisk' replacing the standard grammatical ending (as in (2.4a)), the asterisk can also be inserted far more creatively "in the closing of words that cumulate the masculine and feminine endings" (e.g., lavoratorici*, 'workers. MF*') or "repeated within the same word, where it substitutes a series of graphemes that make up the masculine plural suffix -tori and the feminine plural -trici" (e.g., lavorat**i) (De Cesare 2024, 38).

For most of the strategies in (2.4), it was not possible to trace their first appearance in the public sphere and thus identify their proponents. Certain social movements have however publicly endorsed a particular strategy, either encouraging its adoption or sparking debate around it. That is the case with the 'at' sign (@), whose use has been publicly claimed by the transfeminist movement *Non Una di Meno* (NUDM) 'Not One Less', founded in Italy in 2016. On November 25, 2017, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the transfeminist movement presented the document "Abbiamo un piano. Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere" 'We Have a Plan: A Feminist Plan Against Male Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence', in which, in addition to their political reflections, tools for action also affecting language were identified. The opening page reads as follows:

> In questo Piano abbiamo scelto di svelare la non neutralità del maschile utilizzando non solo il femminile, ma anche la @ per segnalare l'irriducibilità e la molteplicità delle nostre differenze. Consapevoli che le lingue mutano e si evolvono, proviamo a rendere il nostro linguaggio inclusivo per avere nuove parole per raccontarci e per modificare i nostri immaginari. (Non Una di Meno 2017)
>
> 'For this Plan we have chosen to unveil the non-neutrality of the masculine by using not only the feminine, but also the @ to signal the irreducibility and multiplicity of our differences. We are well aware that languages change and evolve, and we seek to make our language inclusive so to have new words to tell our stories with and to modify our imaginaries.'

From these lines, the will to adopt a suffix that is representative of a real diversity – which by its very nature could not be ascribed to a single form – emerges forcefully. It is thus seen as a maximally open word-ending.

Among the proposed special characters, some (e.g., the asterisk and the 'at' sign) are purely graphic grammatical morphemes referring to a cumulative grammatical meaning (i.e., indicating simultaneously masculine/feminine/nonbinary/other and singular/plural) and deemed the equivalent of a logograph, the design of which gives no indication of pronunciation (Sgroi 2020). The graphic signifiers 'u' and 'x', on the other hand, are not purely graphic, as they refer to their phonological values, given the homography with the letters <u> and <x> of the alphabet (Sgroi 2020). This opens up to a number of non-negligible considerations, including the fact that "changing the phonological as well as morphological function to a vowel" – in this particular case <u> – is a very "radical" and invasive linguistic change involving "the attribution of a new morphological value (of gender and number) that can be interpreted semantically" (Giusti 2022, 14-15). Its function is to "replace the binary gendered morphological inflections" in written language, in an attempt to refrain from making the gender of the referent explicit (Formato, Somma 2023, 28). Acting on the body of words to conceal the gender information cannot, however, be framed as a mere intervention on spelling alone, unlike the proposals from the past aimed to shorten the distance between the graphic form and the corresponding pronunciation (cf. Antonelli 2021). It deeply affects the morphology of a language, also unraveling its syntax – with direct implications on the rule of agreement – and textuality, responsible for guaranteeing the agreement of words at a distance, thus contributing to cohesion in discourse (De Santis 2022). After all, the priority function of grammatical gender is that of morpho-syntactic cohesion (Sgroi 2021). Introducing a grammatical innovation of this magnitude would have a very different impact when compared to the introduction of a neologism, precisely because it invests the structural level of the language (Arcangeli 2024).

Having established that the use of the strategies presented in Table 2 is mostly confined to the written communication of online queer communities to refer to both themselves and others (Comandini 2021), only the suffix *-ə* seems to contradict such generalization by invading the publishing field in a consistent manner. In 2020, the Florence-based publishing house *effequ* for the first time adopted the innovative suffix *-ə* to designate people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender in the translation of the Portuguese book written by Marcia Tiburi *Feminismo em comum. Para todas, todes e todos.* Faced with the translation problem posed by the use of the *-e* suffix in Portuguese as representative of a different gender

value, the same end-vowel could not be used in Italian as it is too overtly characterized as feminine (cf. Section 1.4). Therefore, it was necessary to identify a different suffix that could serve such function, without being compromised by an inherent feminine connotation. The choice fell on the symbol *-ə* initially proposed by Luca Boschetto – creator of the project *Italiano Inclusivo. Una lingua che non discrimina per genere* 'Inclusive Italian. A Language that Does Not Discriminate by Gender' –[7] and quickly taken up by Gheno (2019), which sparked off an intense debate. No distinction was made between the singular and the plural, unlike what was stipulated by the model developed by Boschetto, which involves the introduction of a distinct form for the plural, i.e., *-ɜ* (Giusti 2022; De Cesare 2024). It follows that the suffix *-ə* can thus be categorized as a polyfunctional sign in that it can encode both singular and plural, with the number value being obfuscated as an inevitable consequence (D'Achille 2021).

Despite initially favoring a one-sign system (i.e., only *-ə*) in line with the guidelines adopted by the publishing house *effequ*, a considerable shift to a two-sign system – with *-ə* for singular and *-ɜ* for plural – was later recorded, marking an increase in the productivity of both forms, as attested in the analysis carried out by De Cesare (2024) on the texts published between 2018 and 2024 on the *GlobalProject* platform. Part of the increase in productivity was certainly due to an extralinguistic factor, namely its appearance in the keyboards of different devices among the alternatives to the letter <e> as of September 2021 (Arcangeli 2024; De Cesare 2024).[8] As may seem obvious, its absence from smartphone and tablet-mediated communication had hindered its very existence at least at first (Antonelli 2021).

In comparing the two solutions adopted for Italian and Portuguese, a substantial difference emerges: the major advantage brought about by the use of *-e* in Portuguese lies in the fact that it can be easily pronounced as it belongs to the vowel inventory of Portuguese and can therefore be read by any reading software, thus ensuring accessibility to written texts to visually-impaired people (Thornton 2022). The same advantage cannot be found in Italian, as *-ə* is not part of the phonemic inventory of Italian nor is it easily produced by text-to-speech readers.[9] It is indeed a symbol of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) representing the central vowel, produced when the lips, tongue and jaw are completely relaxed and found in unstressed

7 Available at: `https://italianoinclusivo.it`.

8 "*Apple* made the -ə symbol available with the fifteenth update of the iOS operating system for iPhone and iPod touch, released on September 20, 2021" (Arcangeli 2024, 27).

9 This remark on readability applies to all the other punctuation marks and orthographic markers as well.

syllables in a variety of languages, among which is English. Yet, even when it appears within the phonological system of a language, it is still not used as a grapheme, thereby it is hard to be realized in cursive writing and is deprived of a well-established corresponding capital letter (D'Achille 2021). Some speakers of Italian could be more familiar with its pronunciation, as [ə] is included in the vowel systems of southern Italo-Romance dialects, e.g., Neapolitan, in which all vowels in final position are realized as [ə], as shown in the example "bello/-a/-e [bˈbɛllə]" 'beautiful.M.SG/F.SG/PL' (Ledgeway 2016, 251). Nonetheless, Giusti (2022, 14) raises the question of "articulatory proximity" whereby [ə] and [ɜ] risk being perceived as [e]. De Santis (2022) also stresses the point that producing such an indistinct sound would result in progressively leading to the truncation of the words we pronounce, making them increasingly unrecognizable. Ultimately, "there is no adequate evidence showing communicative effectiveness in daily practice" (Robustelli 2021, 14).

To our knowledge, the only experimental attempt to assess the feasibility of using the suffix *-ə* in an oral context is the study conducted by Facchini (2024), yet limited to a particularly restricted context, namely conference interpreting, on a rather small sample (i.e., 12 participants). The research question underlying the study was the following: "is a nonbinary translation strategy such as the *-ə* suffix a viable solution in orality?" (Facchini 2024, 135). Twelve interpreters were instructed to use the *-ə* ending to refer to people when orally translating a speech from English to Italian. The quantitative analysis of the Italian texts shows that the *triggers*[10] translated with *-ə* amount to 20% overall, compared to 16% of the unmarked masculine, hence pointing to a use that is far from being systematic and loosely productive, despite the explicit instruction to employ the *-ə* suffix. Among the formal inconsistencies recorded are recurring words only occasionally declined with the *-ə* suffix, or chains of agreement in which determiners and adjectives are inflected for the masculine (Facchini 2024, 152) (an example might be *C'è un bambinə molto bravo nella mia classe* 'There is a.M.SG child. NB.SG very good.M.SG in.the my class'). Unsurprisingly, the most common strategy has to do with the omission of triggers, followed by the adoption of neutral circumlocutions, including epicene and collective terms, relative or indefinite pronouns, to name a few. As to the cognitive overload connected to the suffix, it should be noted that such use did not prevent, in most cases, correct translations; the disfluencies caused (i.e., interruptions in speech flow, such as silent

10 *Trigger* refers to "an English word or locution with an unexpressed grammatical and semantic gender whose closest translation to the original term is a noun, adjective, past participle, determiner or pronoun to which a marked grammatical and semantic gender must necessarily be assigned in Italian" (Facchini 2024, 136).

and filled pauses, syllabic lengthening, truncated or mispronounced words, repeats, self-corrections, and false starts) were not excessively detrimental to the fluency of discourse (Facchini 2024). The disfluencies observed did not compromise the intelligibility or coherence of the interpreted output, nor did they substantially hinder communicative effectiveness. Therefore, there is reason to believe, at least according to the author of the study, that with greater familiarity, also determined by *ad hoc* training, even more acceptable results can be achieved.

Before delving into more technical criticalities arising from adopting this form, it should be pointed out that a change in *effequ* editorial guidelines in 2021 marked a shift in the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* with respect to its referential function. Originally conceived to give visibility to people of a nonbinary identity, as was the case with Tiburi (2018), *-ə* now tends to be employed as a substitute for the unmarked masculine specifically to "neutralize whichever gender identity within a 'multitude'" of referents (Thornton 2022, 33). In other words, the change in use led to refer to groups including any possible gender identity (i.e., generic mixed group), not just people with nonbinary identities (De Cesare 2024). A similar shift in meaning can be observed in other proposals within the realm of inclusive language, as the degree of referential specificity triggered by any given strategy varies. This variability adds complexity – and can even pose a challenge – to the broader debate on inclusive language, whose uses often lack a single, clear interpretation (De Cesare, Giusti 2024).

As for strictly theoretical observations, the words produced with the suffix *-ə* may vary in their internal structure depending on who is implementing them. There are in fact variants that are freely chosen for lack of an appropriate standard, since it is a linguistic phenomenon that has not been stabilized yet. Particularly, a minor variation has been observed in the formation of determiners. *Effequ* editorial guidelines mention definite articles by prescribing the use of *lə* 'the.NB.SG' for the singular, perceived as closer to *la* 'the.F.SG' and *lo* 'the.M.SG', and *ə* for the plural, closer to *i* 'the.M.PL' (Thornton 2022, 36). The guidelines also take articulated prepositions into account, providing examples such as *dellə maestrə* 'of+the.NB.SG teacher.NB.SG' and *dellə scienziatə* 'of+the.NB.SG scientist.NB.SG' for the singular, and *deə maestrə* 'of+the.NB.PL teachers.NB.PL' and *deə scienziatə* 'of+the.NB.PL scientists.NB.PL' for the plural. As for the indefinite article, in drawing from the recommendations published by *Italiano Inclusivo*, Giusti (2022) reports *unə bambinə* 'a.NB.SG child.NB.SG', which recalls the feminine form to some extent. It can be distinguished from the feminine form by replacing the apostrophe (*un'artista* 'an.F.SG artist.SG') with an asterisk when *unə* precedes a vowel, i.e., *un*artistə* 'an.NB.SG artist.NB.SG' (Giusti 2022, 16). Furthermore, no regular correspondence has been established

between the orthography and phonology of words containing velar and palatal consonants followed by *-ə* (Thornton 2022; Murelli 2024). A case in point is *unə astrofisicə* 'an.NB.SG astrophysics. NB.SG' – read as *astrofisi*/kə/ with /k/ as in its singular feminine and masculine counterparts – as opposed to the plural *autisticə* 'autistic.NB.PL', which can either be read as *autisti*/kə/ with /k/ or *autisti*/tʃə/ with /tʃ/, exhibiting a tighter association with either the feminine or masculine, respectively (Acanfora 2021; Thornton 2022). In Thornton's (2022) view, the failure to disambiguate between the two possible readings of the plural form is a proof of the fact that priority is given to the written language over the spoken language, for which the rules that are laid out obey, first and foremost, the needs of writing, as if the issue of sound articulation was somehow of subordinate importance. Equally problematic are the morphemes *-torə/-torɜ* in deverbal nominals, which show a clear similarity to the masculine morpheme from which they are derived (Giusti 2022), as opposed to the forms *-tricə/-tricɜ* built on the feminine. The aspects examined so far partly unveil the feminine or masculine form from which the resulting innovative elements were originally derived, thus exposing, albeit accidentally, an inherent binarism, as if they were contaminated by the femininity or masculinity value of the base form. These and other unresolved issues are extensively discussed by many authors (cf. Thornton 2022; Giusti 2022; Murelli 2024) who are questioning the soundness of the proposal. Since it was not built around a common standard, it inevitably ends up favoring the coexistence of different, even conflicting, variants.

Additionally, one must consider the implications carried by the introduction of *-ə* on a larger scale, which according to Thornton (2022) can be summarized into the following: the introduction of (i) a new phoneme and (ii) a new gender value. As Thornton (2022) observes, the new gender value requires defining its specific semantic core. A precise characterization is needed, one that clearly distinguishes between referring only to human beings who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender (*specific interpretation*) or all human beings, without mentioning any gender information, be it unknown or deliberately omitted (*generic interpretation*). Corpus analyses conducted on Italian attest that with *-ə*, the generic interpretation prevails, contrasting with what happens with the masculine (cf. Section 1.5). Namely, *-ə* often refers to "an individual without specifying their gender identity or to mixed groups of people of all identities" (Thornton 2022, 42). Therefore, it is not a matter of introducing a third gender value or a neutral, but rather a gender-free form (Gheno 2022). Through this form, supporters of this morphological innovation are attempting to undo the grammatical expression of an opposition between the masculine and feminine values by referring to humans without making use of

the grammatical category of gender altogether (Thornton 2022). The problem is however that such a proposal does not extend to inanimate referents. In other words, the opposition between the two gender values would remain in place at least with referents found in the lower degrees of the animacy hierarchy (Comrie 1983), thus giving rise to an anomalous system in which animate referents do not possess a characterization by gender, while abstract nouns do (Thornton 2022).

In light of the observations made up to here, Pires (2020, 116) identifies three major problems common to all the morphological innovations listed above, which could also concern the innovative suffix *-ə*: (i) "graphocentrism"; (ii) "inappropriateness for learners"; and (iii) "general complexity", all pointing to heavy processing costs, not to mention that distinct devices "do not form an overall system for neutralizing gender in texts". The author further stresses the "variable treatment of speech and writing" instantiated by such "unusual graphical features" by sustaining that they specifically "resist oralization", as "texts containing such elements cannot even be read aloud" (Pires 2020, 111, 115).

In the face of these obstacles, the solution put forward by Pires (2020) lies in the use of a systematic feminine for mixed reference (i.e., *feminine generic*), which guarantees perfect correspondence between written and spoken language by relying on the already available linguistic resources. Defined by Giusti (2024, 102) as a "non-aggressive means", the use of the feminine as the unmarked gender would "entail a simple semantic shift from a formal point of view" going against "the androcentric perspective that permeates the representation of the 'typical' and 'dominant' human being". The failure to embrace the feminine generic is thus to be traced to a purely cultural reason (Giusti 2024). As a confirmation of this, it is not surprising that the mixed-reference feminine for "activities in which females have historically had a prominent role" (e.g., female cashiers, primary-school teachers and nurses) is indeed generally recognized by speakers of French, German and Italian (Pires 2020, 119). The choice of the feminine generic can be justified not only by the need to reclaim visibility of women in language, but also by the practice of "number genericity", according to which the generic is molded on the basis of the numerically dominant group (Pires 2020, 121). Aside from the feminine resolution in itself, number genericity establishes a rather impartial criterion for gender selection, one that depends entirely on the perceived majority of the group members. This does not however erase the problem of being able to linguistically recognize the presence of those who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender, should they prove to be a majority in a given situation, thus leaving open the search for a solution that is truly viable.

Having established that there is a constant exchange characterizing the mutual relationship between language and society, the nudges coming from society do not prevent the language system from resisting those changes that deeply affect its functioning or its formal structure. If the nature of the proposed innovation is admitted by the language system, and some sort of consistency can be detected with it, no resistance will be exerted, as in the case of the use of the feminine forms to indicate professions, whose failure to flourish only stems from a habitual absence of such forms in the discourse (Robustelli 2021). Replacing the masculine and feminine endings with the neutral/nonbinary suffix *-ə*, however, is quite another matter, deemed unacceptable by Robustelli (2021, 5), given that it "modifies to such an extent the morphological structure of the language as to compromise its communicative function". Arcangeli (2022) speaks precisely of the *deconstructing nature of the innovation*, describing *-ə* as a foreign object that violates the orthographic and phono-morphological rules of the language. That is to say, the concealment of gendered morphological inflections jeopardizes the language system, and not just to the detriment of those who do not have full command of the code (such as non-native speakers, for instance) or have limited access to the written or spoken variety of the language (due to some forms of neurodiversity); not to mention the implications it would have on the process of learning to read, which is based on phonetic training, which in turn builds on the correspondence between letters and sounds (Dehaene 2018; De Santis 2022). Preserving the graphic consistency of words is a necessary condition to guarantee the attainment of reading skills, as well as fluency in adult reading, in that it relies on immediate word recognition by means of the initial and final letter (De Santis 2022). Furthermore, the resulting forms often seem to recall the masculine, evoking a veiled referentiality that is precisely intrinsically masculine, thus giving rise to a problem of application that maintains, albeit concealed, the issue of binary oppositions (Robustelli 2021).

2.3 *Degendering* and *Regendering* Strategies Across Different Languages

Many of the strategies presented for Italian can be found in other languages as well, albeit exhibiting characteristic traits. In fact, despite being all encoded as *grammatical gender languages* (Gygax et al. 2019), French, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Italian resort to different strategies in an attempt to become gender-fair languages (De Cesare, Giusti 2024). French resembles Italian in the use of "separation signs" to put "graphical emphasis on the morphological boundary" in the abbreviated double form, with the only difference

that there is much more variation in the signs to be used: *enseignant(e)*, *enseignant.e*, *einsegnant-e*, *enseignant·e*, *enseignantE* 'teacher.SG' (Elmiger 2008, 130-1; Pires 2020, 114). Among the alternatives, the so-called *point médian* 'midpoint' (e.g., *enseignant·e*) seems to be dominating the scene (De Cesare, Giusti 2024). Unlike French and Italian, German has, for a long time, adopted the capitalization technique, namely it "has internal capitals (*Binnengrossschreibung*) to mark off the beginning of the suffix: [*Lehrer* 'teacher.M.SG', *Lehrerin* 'teacher.F.SG'] *LehrerIn*" 'teacher.M/F.SG' (Pires 2020, 114-15). Murelli (2024) refers to this strategy as *Binnenmajuskel* – the first to appear in the context of *feministische Linguistik* (cf. Hellinger, Bierbach 1993) – however defining it as non-conforming to the current spelling rules of German, which specifically require the insertion of a hyphen before the suffix. In addition, for this strategy to be implemented, the feminine form has to be longer than its masculine counterpart. In this sequence, the feminine is inevitably perceived as an extension of the masculine, emphasizing the dominance of the segment on the left of the boundary (Pires 2020). Previously encountered solutions that incorporate special characters – such as the asterisk (*Gendersternchen*) (e.g., *Lehrer*in*, *Lehrer*innen* 'teacher.M/F.SG, teacher.M/F.PL'), the underscore (e.g., *Lehrer_in*), or the colon (e.g., *Lehrer:in*) – are therefore preferred. These forms are particularly valued because they represent the diversity and inclusivity of all gender identities, inviting the reader to understand the referent as potentially belonging to any gender (Zifonun 2018; Günthner 2022; Murelli 2024).[11] Interestingly, as Murelli (2024) points out, lexemes with special characters in German do preserve the original masculine and feminine forms of which they are composed, still recognizable in the resulting new lexemes. In Italian, instead, the use of novel word-final elements gives rise to lexemes that erase not only gender information but also number, with greater implications on the overall morpho-syntactic structure of the sentence, as well as a higher decoding effort.

Returning to the issue of the generic feminine, the University of Leipzig resorts to the feminine exclusively to refer to all genders, by inserting a footnote precisely to make clear that all genders are included (Todeskino 2013). Alongside feminized forms, nominalization of verbs is another accessible strategy in German to coin gender neutral nouns (e.g., "Lecturers are advised to address their students

11 After completion of this section, we realized that on August 3, 2025, according to the online edition of the German newspaper *DIE ZEIT*, the German Federal Chancellery banned the use of gender-fair language in all official documents, instructing its 470 employees in Berlin and Bonn to avoid gender asterisks and similar markers, arguing that such practices are divisive and not representative of the majority's speech.

not as Studenten but Studierenden – 'those that study' – , thus sidestepping the gender question altogether") (Oltermann 2014).[12]

In Spanish, the *o/a* alternation can be substituted by the 'at' sign (@) (2.5a); *-x* also appears potentially in place of any letter (2.5b), whereas in French, the *a/e* alternation (as in the definite articles *la* 'the.F.SG' and *le* 'the.M.SG') can be substituted by *-œ* (2.5c) (Pires 2020, 115):

(2.5) a. *MIS ALUMN@S NON SON NÚMEROS*
'My students are not numbers'
b. *TODXS A LA HUELGA*
'Everybody is taking part in the strike'
c. *C'EST TOI LÆ MÉCANO*
'You are the machinist'

Even more popular as a nonbinary gender marker is the use of *-e* in Spanish (2.6), "which allows the projection to the spoken language and generates stronger restrictions on concordance" (Stetie, Zunino 2022, 7). Since *-e* is phonologically realizable and functions as a regular vocalic ending, it must be consistently propagated across agreement targets (e.g., determiners, adjectives, and other modifiers), thereby imposing stricter morphosyntactic constraints than purely graphic solutions such as @ or x.

(2.6) a. *Elle es une niñe intelligentísime*
'3.NB.SG is a.NB.SG very smart.NB.SG child.NB.SG'

Well-established in many Spanish-speaking communities in America, the use of *-e* has also been attested in Iberian Spanish (Cardelli 2018; Bonnin, Coronel 2021). In Argentina, such a strategy has been deliberately fostered by many cultural and educational institutions responsible for drafting official documentation on the topic (Stetie, Zunino 2022). In the "Guía para incorporar un uso inclusivo del lenguaje" 'Guide to incorporate an inclusive use of language' (2021) compiled by the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, it is possible to draw a sharp distinction in the use of *-e* as opposed to *-x* and *-@*. That is, as illustrated in the excerpts below, forms adopting the *-e* as a suffix stand for the generic, as they presuppose a multitude of genders, whereas forms with *-x* and *-@* are nonbinary-specific in that they do not appear in isolation, but rather are juxtaposed to the feminine and masculine counterparts:

12 *Studenten* is marked for the masculine (cf. feminine *Studentinnen*), whereas *Studierenden* is a gerund unmarked for gender.

> Desde hace un tiempo viene predominando el uso de la e ya que es morfológicamente claro y no afecta la economía del lenguaje. Su uso se ha popularizado [...] también en lo cotidiano de la comunidad universitaria. La ventaja de este recurso es que, a diferencia de los anteriores, incluye otros géneros más allá del femenino y el masculino. La desventaja es que en algunos grupos puede generar rechazo al punto de no lograr los fines comunicativos. Por eso, es necesario siempre tener en cuenta a qué público nos dirigimos y con qué fines. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 10)

> 'For some time now, the use of *e* has been predominant, since it is morphologically clear and does not affect the economy of language. Its use has become popular [...] also in the daily life of the university community. The advantage of this resource is that, unlike the previous ones, it includes other genders beyond the feminine and masculine. The disadvantage is that in some groups it can generate rejection to the point of not achieving the communicative purposes. For this reason, it is always necessary to keep in mind which audience we are addressing and for what purposes.'

> En algunas comunicaciones nos encontramos con la @ y la x. Mediante estos recursos la intención es visibilizar la presencia de otras identidades de género más allá de las masculinas o femeninas. Ejemplo: en lugar de utilizar "delegados" se refiere de manera escrita de la siguiente manera: delegadas, delegados, delegadxs. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 11)

> 'In some communications we find the @ and x. By means of these resources, the intention is to make visible the presence of other gender identities beyond the masculine or feminine ones. For example, instead of using delegates.M.PL, the following is referred to in writing: delegates.F.PL, delegates.M.PL, delegatxs.NB.PL.'

As we observed for Italian above, emphasis is placed on the lack of phonetic realization attributed to such graphic devices, which poses non-negligible limitations that effectively hinder the accessibility of these proposals. The following excerpt further develops this crucial point.

> Las dificultades en el uso de la @ y la x radican en que estas formas no son accesibles para personas con discapacidad visual, intelectual, psicosocial, entre otras, dado que dificultan o impiden la comunicación y la comprensión (no pueden reconocerse mediante lectores de pantalla, no tienen pronunciación oral). Es decir, su uso implica barreras para las personas que utilizan lectores de texto, lenguaje sencillo y otras formas alternativas de comunicación que

> no reconocen dichos caracteres. (Universidad Nacional de San Martín 2021, 11)
>
> 'The difficulties in the use of @ and x lie in the fact that these forms are not accessible to people with visual, intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, among others, since they hinder or prevent communication and understanding (they cannot be recognized by screen readers, they do not have oral pronunciation). In other words, their use implies barriers for people who use text readers, simple language and other alternative forms of communication that do not recognize these characters.'

Particularly, the implementation of such forms could cause major problems for people with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) (Riccio 2024; cf. Arcangeli 2024). While some reports posit that optical readers and speech synthesizers may not consistently support innovative forms, including the suffix *-ə* for Italian, to date no systematic testing has been conducted to confirm this. Therefore, the potential accessibility challenges should be considered a plausible concern rather than an established fact.

The type of interventions analyzed so far can be explained in terms of substituting or recombining linguistic materials, something that can be achieved through various techniques. What follows, instead, considers the process involved in the creation of brand-new pronouns.

Particularly significant is the Swedish experience with the third-gender neutral pronoun *hen* as a complement to the two already existing gendered pronouns, whose use, albeit initially rejected, has now been welcomed and adopted by the majority of language users (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015). It even received official recognition when in 2015 the "Svenska Akademien formalised the entry of the personal pronoun *hen* into Swedish by including it among the neologisms of that year's edition of the dictionary of the national language, updated from decade to decade" (Arcangeli 2024, 23). Originally introduced in the 1960s to be later employed by LGBT-communities in the early 21st century, it appeared for the first time in 2012 in a children's book to denote its main character, so that young readers could "visualize and develop their stories much more freely" without being influenced by gender categories (Hord 2016; Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 2). Adapted from the genderless Finnish third person singular pronoun *hän* 'he/she', Swedish *hen* is used with human referents of unknown or undetectable gender as well as nonbinary people (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, Laakso 2012; Thornton 2022). It can therefore be "used both generically, when gender is unknown or irrelevant, and as a transgender pronoun for people who categorize themselves outside the gender dichotomy" (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015,

1). As shown in Table 3, the novel pronoun "very nicely fits into the Swedish system of pronouns, as being literally very close to, as well as alphabetically positioned between *han* ('he') and *hon* ('she')" (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 10).[13]

Table 3 Swedish system of pronouns

han	***hen***	***hon***	***den***	***det***
Male human referent (*he*)	1. Nonbinary human referent ("transgender pronoun") 2. Human referent of unknown or undetectable gender (generic pronoun)	Female human referent (*she*)	1. Inanimate referent with common gender 2. Single plural form unmarked for gender	Inanimate referent with neutral gender

The study carried out by Gustafsson Sendén and colleagues (2015) is proof of the overturning of an initial resistance to an initiative of gender-fair language into an accepted and viable solution. No matter how hostile reactions can be at the outset, "attitudes can normalize rather quickly" (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, Lindqvist 2015, 1).

The quest for establishing a standard pronoun lacking any gender reference in English goes as far back as the eighteenth century, with at least eighty neopronouns being attested (Baron 1986). Amongst the novel gender-neutral pronouns emerging in the scene are singular *ze* and plural *hir* – or the less productive pair *ze/zir* (Šincek 2020) – promoted by the University of Vermont (Scelfo 2015), whose use is however still confined to small numbers. Like other proposals that go in the same direction, they "tend to fade in and out of collective social consciousness rather quickly" (Hord 2016, 23). The pseudo-generic use of *he* has also been progressively abandoned (Hord 2016). In fact, there appears to be a better candidate, boasting a longer tradition (Balhorn 2004), whose favorability has been empirically demonstrated by studies on formal student writing assignments with speakers of American English (Mitchell 1994) and Australian English (Strahan 2008), that is, singular *they*. One cannot however ignore that at least from a prescriptive grammatical perspective, the claim that *they* can only be plural has been a source of criticism against this usage (Bodine 1975). The above-mentioned studies nevertheless suggest that "younger generations are inherently more used to using

13 Table 3 was built on the basis of the information gathered from Renström, Lindqvist, Gustafsson Sendén 2022 and Giusti 2022.

singular *they* as a generic pronoun, which makes them more inclined to accept its use with a singular referent" (Hord 2016, 10). This is in line with Baron's predictions championing singular *they* as the one doomed to dominate English gender neutral pronoun use, as it "is widely used in speech and writing and, despite the stigma of ungrammaticality that has become attached to it since the eighteenth century, the construction shows no signs of dying out" (1986, 193).

Further experimental confirmation comes from Bradley and colleagues' (2019, 1) research, whose "results suggest that 'they' is interpreted as gender-neutral, including nonbinary/gender-nonconforming referents", whereas "'ze' does not appear to be recognized by enough English speakers to determine a definitive interpretation". It follows that unlike neopronouns, which have hardly caught on, singular *they* has the potential to achieve widespread use (Hord 2016). Giusti (2022, 13) calls it a fully accepted alternative, describing it as the outcome of "a minimal variation of the referential property of *they*, which previously referred to generic human beings or whose gender was not to be specified (perhaps to maintain their anonymity) and now can refer to specific human beings manifesting their fluid identity". Under this interpretation, singular *they* undergoes a functional shift from a purely gender-neutral pronoun to a gender-specific one, employed to signal nonbinariness or, more generally, identities that fall outside the traditional gender binarism. It is no coincidence that in 2015, singular *they* was also selected as "word of the year" by the voting members of the American Dialect Society precisely to refer to a person's choice to reject traditional gender binary pronouns *he* and *she* (Hord 2016, 8). Alternatives include *s/he* as a singular pronoun, alternation of *he* and *she*, avoidance of pronouns, pluralization of referents, the gender-neutral title *Mx*, among others (Mitchell 1994; Bahadur 2013).

German and French exhibit broadly comparable dynamics in the introduction, adoption, and negotiation of gender-neutral pronouns. While it is accurate to say that German lacks a fully standardized gender-neutral pronoun comparable to English singular *they* or Swedish *hen*, this does not imply the absence of proposed or attested alternatives. On the contrary, a range of newly developed forms is acknowledged in institutional contexts, including *sier* and *xier* – conceived as fusions of the binary pronouns *sie* 'she' and *er* 'he' (e.g., *sier/sies/siem/sien*; *xier/xies/xiem/xien*) – as well as *dey* (the Germanized version of English *they*), *hen* (borrowed from Swedish) and *en* (modeled on existing German pronouns following an 'e+consonant' pattern while resembling the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen*) (FAU, Office of Equality and Diversity; University of Osnabrück, Equal Opportunity Office). Nevertheless, they remain non-standard, variable in form and declension, and largely confined

to specific social or institutional domains, thus falling short of full grammatical stabilization within the German pronominal system.

In French, Hord (2016, 7) reports only one "isolated occurrence" of a gender-neutral pronoun, namely *ile*, located in between *il* 'he' and *elle* 'she' and used by an intersex individual in official documents to express their gender identity. Since then, the landscape has changed: the neopronoun *iel* (a blend of *il* and *elle*) has become widely known and was included in the *Le Petit Robert* dictionary in 2021 (Rey-Debove, Rey 2021), reflecting its growing attestation in real usage and community practice. *Iel* and its plural form *iels* are increasingly discussed and documented in sociolinguistic research (Knisely 2020). Despite these advances, *iel* remains non-standard from a normative grammatical standpoint, with ongoing variation in forms and agreement strategies across contexts.

Our discussion so far is not meant to be an exhaustive list. As a matter of fact, attempts at experimenting with novel strategies appear to be steadily increasing across languages. It is therefore difficult to grasp all the nuances of meaning and possible developments. Dwelling on the virtuous examples that have led to some kind of recognition thus seemed to be the best way to proceed, in an attempt to find commonalities with the language under study, i.e., Italian. The experiment designed to test the most widespread strategy toward an inclusive use of the Italian language, i.e., the innovative suffix *-ə*, is thoroughly described in the next chapter.

3 Testing the Efficacy of Adopting the Suffix *-ə* to Achieve Grammatical Gender Inclusion

Index 3.1 Introduction. – 3.2 Study Overview and Research Questions. – 3.3 Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey. – 3.4 The Reference-Assignment Experiment Through Identification of Images. – 3.5 Assessing the Relationship Between the Usage of Sexist Language and the Attitudes Toward It: Is There Room for an Inclusive Language? – 3.6 Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits.

3.1 Introduction

Our study constitutes one of the first attempts at investigating how nonbinary morphological innovations are interpreted and processed in Italian.[1] The experiment draws from various elements gathered across studies conducted on other languages (Bradley et al. 2019; Stetie, Zunino 2022), in an effort to contribute to the ongoing vigorous debate revolving on inclusive language. It is an exploratory study specifically focusing on the comprehension of sentences that contain the morphological innovation *-ə* as a suffix to generate nonbinary, mixed or unknown gender-identity reference. These linguistic stimuli

1 For a more recent experiment on *-ə*, which was not available when our research was conducted, cf. Abbondanza et al. 2025.

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/003

are to be matched with images to check for the correct interpretation of the suffix *-ə*. It follows that the textual and the visual components of the task are equally central. As a corollary to the sentence-picture matching task, during which response times are also recorded, two questionnaires on reading preferences and habits and the attitudes toward a nonsexist language are added.

The chapter is structured as follows. The research questions are first outlined, followed by the Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey, which is crucial for validating the visual materials. The main experimental design is further illustrated, together with the participants' description, the material analysis, and the experimental procedure. The composition of the two questionnaires is covered thoroughly in the remaining sections.

3.2 Study Overview and Research Questions

Lexical access of a word depends on "its frequency (how often a given word appears in a text), the reader's familiarity with its meaning, and the time that has elapsed since the last encounter" (Wolf 2007, 168). The intervention on the ending of a word may hinder its degree of familiarity, at least initially; yet continued exposure to the new form of the word may contribute to surmounting the apparent obstacle represented by the morphological innovation *-ə* used as a suffix. Being Italian a highly inflected language, as illustrated in Section 1.4, the selected morphological marking appears not only in noun phrases but also verb phrases containing past participles. Hence, it is the inflectional system of the language itself that accounts for the pervasiveness of a suffix-based strategy. The redundancy with which the selected suffix appears throughout a piece of text might indeed result in a habituation effect. Through repeated exposure, and by contrast with feminine and masculine gender markings, readers may gradually come to recognize the innovative suffix *-ə* as a gender marker and to familiarize themselves with its use, even if its referential function is not immediately recognizable.

With regard to the responsiveness to this form and the representations it activates, we formulated two research questions. The first question concerns the specialization of *-ə* as a third gender-marking form, extending beyond the binary opposition and allowing for both generic and specific readings:

(I) Does the innovative suffix *-ə* manage to immediately refer to mixed groups with nonbinary people as their members (*generic meaning*) as well as to an individual who does not identify with the binary distinction of gender (*specific meaning*)?

The second question is about whether a novel form implies higher processing costs that translate into longer response times, although evidence from previous studies suggest the opposite trend (Stetie, Zunino 2022). Here, too, the habituation effect could impact on response times, hence determining the processing costs attached to this innovative suffix. In other words, once participants get used to it, their response times will no longer be affected by its originally unusual appearance. It is therefore a matter of ascertaining the following:

(II) Is the processing of *-ə* cumbersome (i.e., time-consuming or cognitive-demanding)? Does the nonbinary form *-ə* require longer response times as opposed to the traditional, long-established suffixes used to refer to feminine and masculine referents?

As to the third question, the generic masculine enters the scene. The study also sets out to measure the influence exerted by the masculine form in leaning towards the exclusive reference to men. In other words,

(III) Does the alleged generic masculine display a bias in favor of an interpretation that sees only men as the exclusive referents?

To examine how Italian speakers interpret referents that are marked with the suffix *-ə*, i.e., to answer question (I), a sentence-picture matching task was developed based on the one used by Bradley and colleagues (2019). As previously introduced, the authors investigated "whether singular, specific 'they' and the novel singular gender-neutral pronoun 'ze' are interpreted as gender-neutral (silent on gender and the gender binary) or referring specifically to referents of nonbinary gender" in English (Bradley et al. 2019, 1). Their findings suggest that the general lack of familiarity with 'ze' makes it hard to determine a definite interpretation, as opposed to the widely accepted singular 'they'. In order to replicate Bradley et al.'s experiment, gender marking had to take a different shape in Italian because this language is pro-drop, and morphological gender marking is pervasive. Introducing a novel suffix not only affects the class of nouns, but also many other elements belonging to both functional and lexical categories (cf. Section 1.4), thus accounting for the risky invasiveness of such an operation. In the adaptation process, considerations of a cultural and social nature have contributed to forming the experimental material (e.g., adjusting to the Italian academic context in which it was to be transferred). The instructions and prompts used are illustrated in Section 3.4.2.1.

Before the actual experiment, we conducted an online norming survey, which was intended to assess the suitability of the

photographic material for the experiment. The authors of the study that inspired our work had also opted for this preliminary procedure so that they would have photos to be considered adequately representative of male, female and nonbinary individuals. For the same reason, we summoned a separate sample of participants who rated the photos by assigning each depicted person a perceived value of femininity-masculinity.

3.3 Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey

3.3.1 Participants and Procedure

An online questionnaire was distributed through a Google Form (Google platform) in February 2023. To be able to access the form and proceed with the filling out, each prospective participant read and accepted an informed consent form, in compliance with the regulation (EU) 2016/679. 90 Italian native speakers participated in the study as an independent sample of participants, whose contribution was restricted to the completion of this questionnaire only, with no further involvement in later phases of the study. The data collected were anonymous, hence respondents' identity could not be traced in any way. All participants were recruited relying on personal connections through a request for participation received via email. Compensation was not provided.

Information about the composition of the sample was gathered through an opening demographic section. 57.8% of the participants (n=52) indicated being between 18 and 25 years of age, and 40% (n=36) between the ages of 26 and 50. Only 2.2% of the participants declared that they were over 50 years old. As for the educational background, 23.3% of the participants (n=21) reported having completed secondary school, 51.1% (n=46) had obtained a Bachelor's Degree, and 24.4% (n=22) were in a higher education program or had received a Master's Degree. Only one participant referred to themselves as a PhD student.

All participants rated 24 photos based on femininity-masculinity judgments using 10-point Likert scales, with femininity and masculinity anchoring the two ends of the scale. The purpose of the task was to come up with three distinct categories containing photos depicting female, male and nonbinary referents, the latter corresponding to those receiving mid-scale scores. The set of photos to be evaluated came from stock photo libraries licensed for reuse, shared by the American research team led by Bradley (2019), responsible for the original selection. The complete list of photos is provided in Appendix A.

Figure 1 Excerpt of a photo array used for photo selection in the experiment. These were rated by participants as feminine, nonbinary and masculine, respectively (following the order from left to right)

The following instructions preceded each photo to guide the evaluation process in an unambiguous and uniform manner:

> *Indica su una scala da 1 (femminile) a 10 (maschile), il tuo giudizio di femminilità-mascolinità selezionando il valore che meglio rappresenta la persona raffigurata.*
>
> 'On a scale from 1 (feminine) to 10 (masculine), give your judgment on femininity-masculinity by selecting the value that best represents the depicted person.'

Based on the ratings assigned to each image by the participants, photos were grouped into three different categories as a result of the application of the gender classification criterion: F (Feminine); M (Masculine); NB (Nonbinary), with each category including 8 photos. The criterion adopted here follows the one established by Bradley and colleagues (2019), for which a detailed description is given in Box 1, thus allowing for a comparison with the ratings obtained by the American sample of participants.[2]

2 The criterion illustrated in Box 1 was determined by extrapolation from the numbers provided in the paper by Bradley and colleagues (2019). In the absence of a dedicated section, we proceeded by reconstructing it and making it explicit here.

Box 1 The gender classification criterion explained

The Gender Classification Criterion

The gender classification criterion is established on the basis of the difference in the scores obtained by the photos. On a 1-10 scale, the threshold value is 6. Thus, to establish boundary values for each category, the score difference between the masculine and feminine category must be greater than 6 (> 6).
The minimum score for a photo to be classified as masculine is obtained through the following calculation: 7.1 − 1 = 6.1; where 7.1 is the first available score (smallest number) to provide a number greater than 6 when the all-feminine score (1) is subtracted from it. From 7.1 (boundary value) onwards (up to 10, included) photos are thus classified as masculine, as the subtraction gives a number greater than 6. The same calculation applies to the feminine category: up to which scores is the score difference between feminine and masculine greater than 6? (7,1 − 1 = 6,1; 8,1 − 2 = 6,1 etc.).
The boundary values that follow hence account for a valid tripartition:

- Feminine (1-3)
- Nonbinary (3.1-7)
- Masculine (7.1-10)

To sum up, for a photo to be classified as *feminine*, it must obtain a mean score ranging between 1-3. For it to be classified as *nonbinary*, it must be included in the interval 3.1-7, whereas the *masculine* range goes from 7.1 to 10, included.

3.3.2 Results

The data obtained from our sample of participants were interpreted by applying the classification criterion **[box 1]** posited by Bradley and colleagues (2019). The resulting classification (see Appendix A for a complete list) mirrors that outlined by Bradley and colleagues, with no differences that could point to cultural biases in the image-assessment activity, ultimately leading to the replication of the same tripartition obtained by the authors. The collected ratings turned out to fit into the intervals provided by the American researchers. Such intervals are responsible for demarcating the boundaries of each category, namely dictating the membership of each photo to either the feminine, masculine or nonbinary category, respectively. No photo ended up being 'misplaced', hence rated incongruous with the score obtained by the American sample. This proves that Italian respondents shared with the American experimental group the perception of the feminine-masculine profile of the depicted person for each single photo.

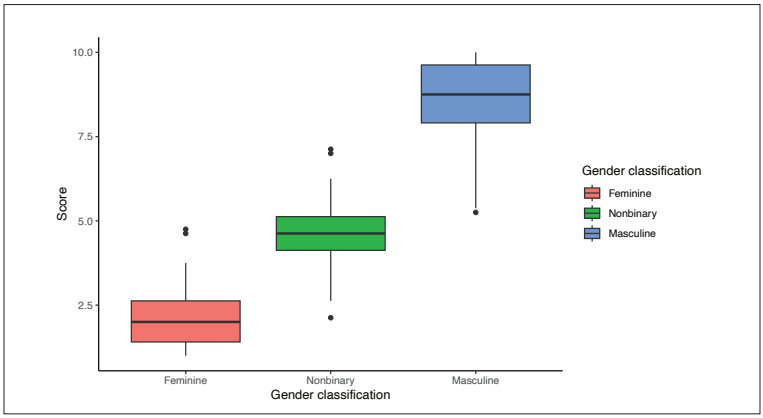
As shown in Table 4, the mean score for all ratings assigned to feminine photos is 2.09 (SD = 0.185), thus placing the mean score of the category within the range previously defined by Bradley and colleagues (2019) as feminine (1-3). The most frequently assigned value (mode) is 1, corresponding to the upper threshold for classification as feminine. The same goes for the other two categories: the mean score

for the nonbinary category is 4.64 (*SD* = 0.078), with the mode being 5, and for the masculine category is 8.58 (*SD* = 0.164), with the mode being 10, corresponding to the upper threshold for classification as masculine. Both values fall within the specific range supplied by Bradley and colleagues (2019).

Table 4 Mean score, standard deviation, mode, median, minimum and maximum values are reported for each category

	Mean	SD	Mode	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Feminine	2.0972222	0.185389	1	2	1	9
Nonbinary	4.6416667	0.078336	5	4.5	1	10
Male	8.5916667	0.164385	10	9	1	10

If we look at the score distribution for each category (F, NB, M) in Graph 1, the difference in score is clearly distinguishable, as each distribution, i.e., each box, is remarkably detached from the others. This allows us to visualize how all respondents did indeed perceive the pre-identified photos labeled as feminine as actually being feminine. The same patterns are detectable for the other groups (M, NB). The central line marking the median value further stresses the point by placing itself in conjunction with the center of the established intervals.

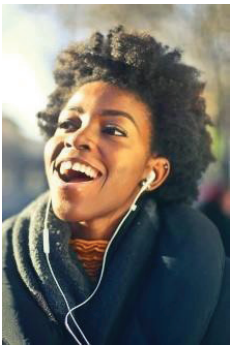


Graph 1 Distribution of the assigned scores for each category

As an example, Table 5 reports the mean score and most frequent score for *Photo 2*. Not only does the image fall within the range labeled as feminine, but its most frequent score coincides with the maximum value of femininity (1) available in the scale. Hence, the

photo was rated unanimously as full-fledged feminine. No conflicting scores pointing to a different direction were recorded. As displayed by the mode of the feminine category **[tab. 4]**, the remaining 7 photos showed the same trend detected in *Photo 2*. Appendix A reports the main descriptive statistics for each photo.

Table 5 Mean score, most frequent score and assigned label are reported for Photo 2

	**Mean score**	2.18
	Most frequent score (Mode)	1 (39.3% of participants)
	Photo rated as	Feminine

3.4 The Reference-Assignment Experiment Through Identification of Images

This experiment aims at testing whether sentences containing the *-ə* suffix are matched with photos of gender-diverse referents, so as to determine the feasibility of this strategy in achieving grammatical recognition of nonbinary gender. Besides the supposedly correct reference assignment, the feasibility of this strategy is equally tested. This will be determined by looking at the response times registered in correspondence of the stimuli displaying such morphological innovation, to be later compared with those containing the gender markers characterizing Italian. The experiment is conducted to determine whether the strategy's viability is real or whether it enters into a conflict with the language system, which is manifested through longer response times accounting for higher processing costs.

We simulated an assessment procedure in which participants were invited to assist the appointed committee members by reviewing the application materials and returning a preliminary evaluation of the candidates' profiles. Specifically, participants were asked to read the descriptions of the candidates, gauge their academic profiles based on three parameters and select the photos that match the described candidates. The test is presented in the following sections.

3.4.1 Participants

81 native Italian speaking participants (44 F, 37 M, age range 18-30 years, mean age 24;8 years) took part in the experiment.[3] One participant was excluded from the study due to their task performance error (i.e., selecting more than one required element at a single item). Hence, 80 participants are considered from now on.

As to their geographical origin, 61.25% of the participants (n=49) indicated Emilia Romagna as their region of origin, 17.5% (n=14) indicated Veneto, whereas the remaining indicated Lazio (n=4), Toscana (n=3), and Calabria (n=2). Campania, Lombardia, Piemonte, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Trentino, and Umbria count one participant each.

All participants were either recruited through in-person invitation on campus at Ca' Foscari University of Venice or through a request for participation received via email (in this case relying on personal connections). No compensation was provided. All participants gave informed consent to participate.

42/80 participants (F=24; M=18) were randomly assigned to the singular-plural tasks' sequence of administration and 38/80 participants (F=20; M=18) were randomly assigned to the opposite sequence (i.e., plural-singular), to control for a possible effect of the order of administration of the tasks.

3.4.2 Textual and Visual Materials

3.4.2.1 Textual Materials

Two sets of eight items were constructed to be run in two separate experimental tasks (*Task 1*; *Task 2*), for a total of 16 items. The aim of the first task was to investigate whether the *-ə* suffix can be applied to a single nonbinary referent, whereas the purpose of the second task was to determine whether it can be used to refer to nonbinary-only or mixed-gender groups (of male, female and nonbinary composition). The overall goal was to establish the inclusive nature of the *-ə* suffix with both singular and plural referents. Therefore, number discriminates between the two tasks. *Task 1* contains singular terms, with feminine singular, masculine singular and nonbinary singular as its conditions, while plural was used in *Task 2* – where feminine plural, masculine plural and nonbinary plural are labeled as its conditions.

In both tasks, the independent variable is grammatical gender. The levels of the independent variable are three (feminine, masculine,

3 No participant selected 'nonbinary' or 'other' as their gender identity.

nonbinary).[4] Each condition is repeated twice, so as to obtain two feminine stimuli, two masculine stimuli and two nonbinary stimuli (two descriptions for each level of the independent variable). Each participant thus received six singular descriptions for *Task 1*, and six plural descriptions for *Task 2*.

Additionally, each set included two items lacking gender marking, referred to as the *neutral* or *zero condition*. By incorporating this condition into the experimental trials, we aimed to detect any differences in response times by comparing participants' responses to gender-marked versus unmarked (i.e., neutral) conditions. The distractors in the experiment were the parameters used to prompt participants to evaluate candidates' academic profiles (e.g., 'academic preparation'), thereby shifting their focus away from the actual object of investigation.

Each item set consisted of eight target descriptions: six gender-marked and two unmarked (neutral) items (see Table 6 for the internal structure of each task's item set). The following section details the construction of the stimuli and the linguistic choices adopted.

Table 6 Internal structure of the set of items that make up each task

Experimental set	***Condition***	***Task 1***	***Task 2***
Items	gender-marked	2 F SG	2 F PL
		2 M SG	2 M PL
		2 NB SG	2 NB PL
	unmarked for gender	2 neutral SG	2 neutral PL

Each participant was provided with the same sets of items – with presentation order randomized across participants – along with instructions that were presented in the form of an official notice issued by a hypothetical Italian university. This text was created after the instructions used by Bradley and colleagues (2019), which were kindly provided to us by Evan D. Bradley on November 29, 2022. The call designed for *Task 1* (to be referred to as *Instruction 1*) launches the opportunity to apply for a mentoring program, whereas the call conceived for *Task 2* (labeled as *Instruction 2*) is for funding research projects. They both served the function of instructions for the experiment. Since the purposes are distinct, the type of

4 To maintain consistency with the use of the terms *masculine* and *feminine*, we have chosen to use the label *nonbinary* to refer to items containing the innovative suffix *-ə*. While we recognize that *nonbinary* is conventionally applied to people – and we use it that way elsewhere in this study, we adopt it also to describe a grammatical marking that is neither masculine nor feminine, yet still marks gender. We have deliberately avoided the term *inclusive*, as we cannot assume that this form is truly inclusive. Assessing the perceived inclusivity of this gender marking is a central aim of our study.

evaluation activity carried out by participants was set to slightly different parameters. The *Instruction 1* is provided in Box 2.

Box 2 Instruction 1

Bando per l'affidamento di attività tutoriali

SELEZIONE PER L'AFFIDAMENTO DI ATTIVITÀ TUTORIALI, DIDATTICO-INTEGRATIVE, ATTIVITÀ PROPEDEUTICHE E DI RECUPERO

Il Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali indice una selezione per titoli per l'affidamento a studenti capaci e meritevoli, iscritti ai corsi di dottorato, di attività tutoriali, didattico-integrative, propedeutiche e di recupero da svolgere nel primo semestre dell'a.a. 2022/2023. I tutor dovranno assicurare la propria disponibilità in tutto il periodo in cui si svolgerà il servizio. In particolare, è possibile presentare domanda per le seguenti attività: linguistica generale, lingua inglese 1, e linguistica applicata.

La selezione verrà svolta da una Commissione appositamente nominata dalla Direttrice del Dipartimento con successivo provvedimento. Per agevolare l'intervento della Commissione, la segreteria ha preparato dei riassunti dei materiali di candidatura degli studenti che hanno partecipato al concorso.

A partire da questi materiali, il tuo compito sarà quello di esprimere, per ciascun candidato, un giudizio in termini di:

1. Preparazione accademica (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
2. Esperienza pregressa (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
3. Idoneità al ruolo (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)

Una volta conclusa questa prima fase di valutazione, ti verrà chiesto di selezionare l'immagine raffigurante il candidato descritto.

'**Mentoring Program Call for Applications**

Recruitment procedure for educational and remedial courses

The Department of Linguistics and Cultural Studies announces a merit-based selection process for the assignment of mentoring educational and remedial activities. This is awarded to capable and deserving students enrolled in Ph.D. programs, to be carried out in the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023. Mentors must ensure their availability for the entire period during which the service will be carried out. In particular, applications may be submitted for the following activities: General Linguistics, English Language 1, and Applied Linguistics.

A special committee appointed by the dean at a later time is in charge of the selection procedure. To facilitate the committee's work, summaries of the application materials for each student were provided by the administrative office.

Your job is to read the summary and rate each student on various qualities, and to decide whether to recommend them for the position.

1. Academic Preparation (Poor Average Good Outstanding)
2. Previous Experience (Poor Average Good Outstanding)
3. Suitability for the Role (Strongly Discourage Discourage Recommend Strongly Recommend)

Once this initial assessment phase has been completed, you are asked to select the photo that matches the description of the candidate.'

In adapting the original experimental materials shared by Bradley and colleagues (2019) to the Italian academic context, the resulting notice takes on the appearance of an actual document issued by an existing university. This served the goal of making it more credible to participants that they were actually working on something real, that they were making a contribution to the university administrative procedures having to do with allocating funds, causing, as anticipated, the gender issue to take a back seat. To this end, the instruction emphasized the importance of reviewing the application material extensively so as to optimize the whole selection process.

The formal nature of the notice further stresses the level of reality behind the task, in that it resorts to the linguistic choice of the 'unmarked' masculine (Pires 2020) – a defining strategy of the communication style adopted by the national academic environment introduced in Section 2.2.1. Instances of the 'unmarked' masculine in the plural or in the generic singular are found in the Italian version whenever the person to whom the formal notice is addressed is being overtly mentioned – be it referred to as the candidate, the mentor, or simply the student. More precisely, the following gender-bearing referents were underlined in the text: *studenti capaci e meritevoli* 'capable.PL and deserving.PL students.M.PL'; *i tutor* 'the.M.PL mentors'; *per ciascun candidato* 'for each.M.SG candidate.M.SG'.

As noted above, three parameters act as distractors by redirecting the reader's attention to the corresponding identified aspects constituting the core of the evaluation. For *academic preparation* (parameter 1) to be defined, reference must be made to the academic level achieved, expressed not only in the degree of education attained but also in the scores obtained. *Previous experience* (parameter 2) is assessed in terms of whether or not similar work experience has taken place in the past. Lastly, to determine *suitability for the role* (parameter 3), participants must rely on the pertinence of the candidate's assimilated knowledge, indicated by the degree to which the proposed research project resonates with the kind of expertise required by the notice, to be established on the basis of the actual topic of the doctoral dissertation as well as the chosen leading discipline and the number of publications. All information meeting these three parameters was therefore included among the details disclosed for each candidate, as specified in the backbone scheme common to all items. This scheme follows a fixed sequence: enrolment year, doctoral program, passing grade, weighted average mark, leading discipline, dissertation proposal, number of publications, and number of courses as a mentor. These factors are considered crucial in Italy when assessing academic profiles, a relevance further reinforced by the task instructions simulating an evaluation procedure, which explicitly required their inclusion for a complete assessment. The scheme **[box 3]**, adapted from Bradley and colleagues (2019, personal communication),

was applied uniformly across all items, except in the neutral condition, where some reformulation was necessary.

Box 3 The backbone scheme of each item adapted from Bradley et al. (2019), here marked for masculine singular

Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del _____ (*anno di iscrizione*) anno in _____ (*programma di dottorato*).
In magistrale, si è laureato con un voto di _____ (*voto di laurea magistrale*).
La media ponderata del candidato, in magistrale, era di _____ (*media ponderata in magistrale*).
In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento del candidato è _____ (*disciplina di riferimento*).
Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà: _____ (*argomento di tesi dottorale*).
Il candidato vanta _____ (*numero di pubblicazioni*) pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stato tutor di _____ (*numero corsi tenuti come tutor*) corsi.
Il candidato risulta regolarmente iscritto per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The candidate is a _____(*enrolment year*) PhD student in _____ (*doctoral program*).
He graduated from the MA program with _____ (*passing grade*).
The weighted average mark of the candidate during the master was _____ (*weighted average mark*).
The leading discipline of the candidate in the academic arena is _____ (*leading discipline*).
The topic of the doctoral dissertation is _____ (*dissertation proposal*).
The candidate has _____ (*number of publications*) publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, he mentored in_____ (*number of courses as a mentor*) courses.
The candidate is duly enrolled in the current academic year.'

To fill out candidates' profiles, we adhered to multiple criteria. Moving from the need to produce realistic descriptions, the drawing from existent degree programs and universities was deemed imperative for choosing the characteristics of each candidate. Specifically, we opted for a matching criterion that would ensure the following chain to be formed: the leading disciplines in postgraduate studies were matched with doctoral programs representing their natural continuation, which in turn were assigned plausible project proposals reflecting the content stipulated in the PhD course syllabus. Analogously, the passing grade depended on the weighted average mark, and so on.

Before dwelling on the peculiarities of each item, there is one property whose value is shared by them all, that is, length. Each item counts a total number of 238 syllables. Controlling for this variable has enabled us to establish that length cannot interfere with any potential *different* processing of the stimuli. Should slower processing occur in any condition, as supposedly reflected in response times, we can confidently rule out the contribution of item length,

thereby attributing any observed effects to other factors. A functional criterion was also applied to maintain this syllabic uniformity across items. To this end, the various characteristics were counterbalanced in terms of their syllable count. Take as a reference the enrollment year. Since there is one syllable discriminating between *primo* 'first' and *secondo* 'second', those who are enrolled in a PhD program whose name contains 19 syllables were assigned to the first year of the doctoral program, whereas those enrolled in an 18-syllables program were assigned to the second year. In doing so, each text achieves the same number of syllables.

By completing the missing information in the backbone scheme, we obtain the first masculine singular item, illustrated in Box 4. The feminine and nonbinary singular items follow, thus proceeding from the alleged least marked to the most marked and/or innovative. The neutral condition, devoid of gender markers, is presented at the end of the analysis. With respect to where gender information can be retrieved, there are four grammatical categories present in the stimuli that dispose of such specification (cf. Section 1.4), that is, nouns (e.g., *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG'), determiners (e.g., *il* 'the.M.SG'), past participles (e.g., *laureato* 'graduated.M.SG') and articulated prepositions (e.g., *del* 'of+the.M.SG'), for a total of 15 gender markers per item.[5] By contrast, subject pronouns – also carrying the gender feature – do not appear, as their omission is permitted by Italian being a pro-drop language. The English translation contains glosses that provide information about the grammatical properties of gender and number, which are relevant to our study. The implemented tag system adheres to the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie, Haspelmath, Bickel 2008).

5 The reported examples are all taken from the masculine singular item 1.

Box 4 Masculine singular item 1

Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del *primo* anno in *Filologia classica, italianistica e linguistica*. In magistrale, si è laureato con un voto di *110L*. La media ponderata del candidato, in magistrale, era di *29.2*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento del candidato è *Lingua*, *Letteratura, Filologia Latina*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *La traduzione di Omero in Virgilio: sondaggi dal primo libro dell'Eneide*. Il candidato vanta *3* pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stato tutor di *2* corsi. Il candidato risulta regolarmente iscritto per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG in Classical Philology, Italian Studies and Linguistics. [He] graduated.M.SG from the MA program with 110 cum laude. The weighted average mark of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG during the master was 29.2. The leading discipline of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG in the academic arena is Latin Language, Literature and Philology. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The translation of Homer in Virgil: surveys from the first book of the Aeneid.* The.M.SG candidate.M.SG has 3 publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [he] mentored.M.SG in two courses. The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is duly enrolled.M.SG in the current academic year.'

When looking at noun classification, the noun *studente* 'student' is categorized as a common-gender noun by Italian normative grammar, due to its *-e* ending. However, our opting for the ending *-essa* for the feminine condition, and *-ə* for the third gender nonbinary condition, as illustrated shortly, allows us to interpret *studente* as masculine in our experimental design, so as to attain the same number of gender-specific occurrences (amounting to 15) across all items.

Rejection of pronouns serves two complementary purposes: on the one hand, it enables us to ignore the need to identify a pronominal form, which is a problematic operation for the nonbinary condition; on the other hand, it guarantees the reiteration of the noun phrase in its full form, hence imposing a certain representation of the referent, which repeatedly returns in the identified form. In the specific instance examined here, the full noun phrase *il candidato* 'the.M.SG candidate.M.SG' is forced to be a constant presence throughout the stimulus.

The feminine singular item reported in Box 5 shares the same characteristics of the masculine stimuli (singular task), i.e., repetition of the full noun phrase and related omission of pronouns. It reflects the regularities introduced by the masculine items.

Box 5 Feminine singular item 1

La candidata è una studentessa dottorale del *primo* anno in *Scienze linguistiche - Curriculum Linguistica educativa*. In magistrale, si è laureata con un voto di *104*. La media ponderata della candidata, in magistrale, era di *26.3*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento della candidata è *Psicologia cognitiva e dello sviluppo*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *Lo sviluppo della teoria della mente in contesti di deprivazione*. La candidata vanta *1* pubblicazione nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stata tutor di *1* corso. La candidata risulta regolarmente iscritta per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is a.F.SG first-year PhD student.F.SG in Language Sciences - Educational Linguistics Curriculum. [She] graduated.F.SG from the MA program with 104. The weighted average mark of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG during the master was 26.3. The leading discipline of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG in the academic arena is Cognitive and Developmental Psychology. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The Development of the Theory of Mind in Cases of Environmental Deprivation*. The.F.SG candidate.F.SG has 1 publication in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [she] mentored.F.SG in one course. The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is duly enrolled.F.SG in the current academic year.'

It is no surprise that the nonbinary condition **[box 6]** corresponds to the synthesis of a series of inventive, yet informed linguistic decisions. The latter deserve much attention, as they have to do with the choice of the gender of the word base to which to bind the innovative suffix *-ə*, as evidenced by the variability of the productions found across speakers (cf. Section 2.2.2).

Box 6 Nonbinary singular item 1

Lə candidatə è unə studentə dottorale del *primo* anno in *Linguistica applicata all'ambito clinico infantile*. In magistrale, si è laureatə con un voto di *108*. La media ponderata dellə candidatə, in magistrale, era di *28.7*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dellə candidatə è *Linguistica per l'acquisizione patologica*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *L'insegnamento esplicito delle frasi relative in bambini con DPL*. Lə candidatə vanta *3* pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è statə tutor di *2* corsi. Lə candidatə risulta regolarmente iscrittə per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is a.NB.SG first-year PhD student.NB.SG in Clinical Linguistics Applied to Language in Childhood. [They] graduated.NB.SG from the MA program with 108. The weighted average mark of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG during the master was 28.7. The leading discipline of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG in the academic arena is Linguistics for Atypical Language Acquisition. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The explicit teaching of relative clauses in children with DLD*. The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG has 3 publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [they] mentored.NB.SG in two courses. The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is duly enrolled.NB.SG in the current academic year.'

Articulatory simplicity and reading fluency were the guiding principles for selecting the gender on which we modeled the nonbinary condition. It was a delicate choice in that it determined the identification of the word root (intended in a broad sense) to be combined with the suffix under investigation. As it turned out, formation of determiners and nouns had to take different paths to ensure maximum articulatory accessibility.

As to determiners, despite wide fluctuations (Giusti 2022; Thornton 2022), even among the social community (Comandini 2021), between the two possible forms *ə* and *lə* (built on *i*.M.PL, and *le*.F.PL, respectively), we opted for *lə* for both singular (and plural) nonbinary referents in an effort to facilitate the reading aloud of such stimuli **[box 6, 11]**. Selection of this particular form was thus dictated by phonological restrictions, impacting sound articulation and production. It is reasonable to assume that by choosing the option consisting of vowels alone, the reading aloud would be particularly hampered.

The discussion centered around noun formation, and the rationale for using a different starting root compared to determiners, is postponed to *Task 2*, as the phenomenon is most visible in the plural condition.

We now turn to the items whose main challenge lies in avoiding any gender-related information (i.e., the neutral condition). We therefore find ourselves on the opposite pole of the issue at hand.

So far we have looked at several strategies to uncover gender details. One of them was certainly the use of the masculine as a generic reference, particularly debated in recent years, which, in our experiment, makes its appearance in the instructions. We therefore return to this strategy specifically to emphasize the distance that is generated between the resulting instructions, deemed highly connotated, and a condition denuded of gender markers, thus having opposite features. Whilst the instructions deliberately reflect the most traditionalist views embraced within academia, welcoming the 'unmarked' masculine on credibility grounds **[box 2]**, neutral items overtly display an alternative route free from gender specification. Their neutrality emerges with immediacy, ensuring an equally smooth reading, as can be seen in Box 7.

Box 7 Neutral singular item 1

L'aspirante tutor frequenta il primo anno di dottorato in Scienze del linguaggio - Curriculum Letterario editoriale. Ha conseguito la laurea magistrale con un voto di 98. La media ponderata dell'aspirante tutor era di 23.9. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dell'aspirante tutor è Elementi di editoria informatica. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *Dalla carta al digitale: gli effetti sulle piccole case editrici*. L'aspirante tutor non vanta pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ma esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico di 1 corso.
L'iscrizione all'anno accademico in corso risulta regolarmente registrata.

'The applicant for the position of mentor is carrying out the first year of doctoral research in Language sciences - Literary Publishing Curriculum. Having graduated from the MA program with 98, the weighted average mark of the applicant during the master was 23.9, whose leading discipline in the academic arena is Elements of Digital Publishing. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *From paper to digital: the effects on small publishing houses*. The applicant has no publications in the discipline of interest but past experience as a specialized mentor for 1 course. Enrollment in the current academic year appears to be duly registered.'

Regarding the process of item construction, this instance proves that it is possible, albeit with effort, to produce descriptions omitting any indication with respect to gender. Among the strategies are epicenes and ungendered terms – a class of words in Italian for which "no gender assignment is predictable from either the word ending or the article" that accompanies it (e.g., *l'erede* 'the.SG heir.SG') (Cacciari, Carreiras, Cionini 1997, 517) (cf. Section 1.4 and 2.2.1). Analogously, epicenes prevent the exact identification of a specific gender to be attributed to these "functionally ambiguous words" or semantically common-gender terms by granting permission for a mismatch to occur between morphosyntactic gender and semantic gender (e.g., *la vittima* 'the.F.SG victim.F.SG') (Cacciari, Carreiras, Cionini 1997, 517; Giusti 2022). In both cases, the referent could be a female, a male or a nonbinary individual, and there is no way to infer that information from the mere juxtaposition of the determiner and the noun. The same goes for the periphrasis *l'aspirante tutor* 'the aspiring mentor'. Although the noun *tutor* 'mentor' that appears in isolation can be easily disambiguated by means of the determiner, e.g., *il/la tutor* 'the.M/the.F mentor' – thus allowing for the overt manifestation of morphosyntactic gender –, the presence of the adjective cannot lead to gender determination owing to the *-e* ending and the initial vowel. Second-class adjectives display a single form (*-e*) for both masculine and feminine, contrasting with first-class feminine (*-a*) and masculine (*-o*) endings. The determiner consists of only the consonant /l/ because the following word starts with a vowel. Therefore, neither the noun-adjective agreement nor the determiner provides any clue about the gender of the referent.

A redundancy effect is exerted by the repetition of the noun phrase *l'aspirante tutor* 'the aspiring mentor', which appears insistently throughout the stimulus to prevent insertion of pronouns. As opposed to languages like English – being non-pro-drop, hence requiring explicit mention of the subject at all times, be it the full noun phrase or a pronoun – , Italian features null subjects, thus preventing gender-marked pronouns and even full DPs from entering each description. However, repetition of full DPs in subject position is a recurring feature across all items. This is particularly relevant in the nonbinary condition, which contains an innovative morpheme seeking to establish itself. The assumption is that repeated exposure within the same item, achieved even through the contribution of word endings alone, leads to a more likely consolidation of the innovative form (habituation effect; cf. Section 3.2). Habituation to forms that are unexpected at first glance but which, as the reading unfolds, end up being discernible and not foreign, is so promoted.

We now address the linguistic decisions underlying the plural conditions for *Task 2*. As specified earlier, *Instruction 2* announces the possibility of obtaining funding for research projects through a selection procedure whose main criteria are listed at the end of the notice. The *Instruction 2* is provided in Box 8.

Box 8 Instruction 2

Bando per il finanziamento di progetti di ricerca nel campo di Scienze della Vita

Con il presente bando si intende promuovere il potenziamento della ricerca e dell'innovazione nel settore di Scienze della Vita attraverso il sostegno a progetti di ricerca che ***contribuiscono alla creazione di condizioni di benessere duraturo e sostenibile in termini di salute e crescita per gli esseri umani e l'ambiente****. A tale scopo, il programma si prefigge di finanziare progetti che per complessità e natura richiedono la collaborazione di più unità di ricerca. La costituzione del gruppo di ricerca è dunque flessibile, purché veda la partecipazione di più unità provenienti dallo stesso ateneo: LS - Scienze della vita.*

La selezione verrà svolta da una Commissione appositamente nominata che si pronuncerà a partire dai seguenti materiali di candidatura preparati dalla segreteria. Il tuo compito sarà quello di visionarli ed esprimere, per ciascun progetto, una valutazione sulla base dei tre parametri proposti:

1. pertinenza della proposta progettuale rispetto all'obiettivo in grassetto (cioè quanto questa proposta risponde all'obiettivo) (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
2. originalità e impatto sociale del progetto di ricerca (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente);
3. qualità del profilo scientifico del gruppo di ricerca (basandoti su bandi vinti, esperienza, pubblicazioni) (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)

Una volta terminata questa prima fase, ti si chiede di selezionare l'immagine che pensi possa raffigurare il gruppo di ricerca descritto.

'**Call for proposals:**
Grant funding opportunities for research projects in the field of Life Sciences

The purpose of this call is to promote research and foster innovation in the field of Life Sciences by supporting research projects that ***contribute to creating conditions of lasting and sustainable well-being in terms of health and growth for both human beings and the environment****. To this end, the program aims at funding projects that by their complexity and nature require the collaboration of multiple research units. Group composition is therefore flexible, as long as it sees the participation of more than one unit from the same university: LS - Life Sciences.*

A specially appointed committee is in charge of the selection procedure, whose work is based on the following application materials that were provided by the administrative office. Your job is to go through them, one by one, and rate each project on the basis of the three proposed parameters:

1. Relevance of the project proposal to the objective in bold (i.e., how well this proposal meets the objective) (Poor Average Good Outstanding);
2. Originality and social impact of the research project (Poor Average Good Outstanding);
3. Quality of the research team's scientific profile (based on previous grants, experience, publications) (Poor Average Good Outstanding);

Once this initial assessment phase has been completed, you are asked to select the photo that matches the described research team.'

The assessing activity here focuses on the research project *per se*, being the object of scrutiny. In fact, the first parameter demands an evaluation in terms of project-orientation, with the second parameter calling for a judgment about its originality as well as social implications. Only in the third and last parameter concerning the quality of the scientific profile are the proponents called upon. However, they are referred to explicitly through the collective noun *gruppo di ricerca* 'research group'. The distinguishing feature of collective nouns such as 'group' or 'team' (as in 'research team's scientific profile') is that they allow to make reference to a community of people, whether large or small, while circumventing the gender issue (cf. Section 2.2.1). In other words, by adopting this strategy no assumption can be made as to the gender of the group components. The same rationale applies to the periphrasis *unità di ricerca* 'research unit'. This kind of reasoning also underlies the shaping of the referents found in neutral plural items **[box 12]**, which go by the name of 'members of the research team'. The neutral condition for the plural will be further explored later on.

Two examples of the masculine and feminine plural items are provided in Box 9 and 10, respectively.

Box 9 Masculine plural item 1

I candidati sono *ricercatori a tempo determinato di tipo A*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultati vincitori di 1 bando. I candidati propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Analisi genetica di persone con Corea di Huntington*; la cui finalità è di *proporre nuove strategie farmacologiche e cellulari per rallentarne il decorso o bloccarne l'insorgenza*. I candidati saranno impegnati nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *24* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Santa Barbara, California*. Tutti i candidati si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *5* anni. Sono autori di *5* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are fixed-term type A researchers.M.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.M.PL winners.M.PL of a funding program. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are proposing the following research project: *Genetic testing for Huntington's chorea*; the aim of which is to come up with new pharmacological and cellular strategies to slow down its course or block its onset. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL will be engaged.M.PL in the research activity for a period of 24 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Santa Barbara, California. All.M.PL (the.M.PL) candidates.M.PL have been committed.M.PL to this field of research for 5 years. [They] have authored.M.PL 5 scientific publications on the subject.'

Box 10 Feminine plural item 1

Le candidate sono *professoresse ordinarie*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultate vincitrici di *2* bandi. Le candidate propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio delle interazioni tra specie e uomo-ambiente*, la cui finalità è di *studiare le risposte delle comunità biologiche ai cambiamenti globali a tutela della loro sopravvivenza e del mantenimento della biodiversità*. Le candidate saranno impegnate nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *24* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Lima, Perù*.
Tutte le candidate si sono dedicate a questo settore di ricerca per *7* anni. Sono autrici di *6* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are full.F.PL professors.F.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.F.PL winners.F.PL of two funding programs. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are proposing the following research project: *The study of organism-environment and human-environment interactions*; the aim of which is to study the responses of biological communities to global changes for the safeguard of biodiversity conservation. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL will be engaged.F.PL in the research activity for a period of 24 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Lima, Peru.
All.F.PL (the.F.PL) candidates.F.PL have been committed.F.PL to this field of research for 7 years. [They] have authored.F.PL 6 scientific publications on the subject.'

The structure of plural items follows the one designed for the singular, with a change in content. The identifying entries for the plural descriptions are the following: academic status, number of research grants awarded, research proposal, project relevance, expected duration of the project in months, international collaborations,

temporal engagement in the research area, number of publications.[6] In compiling the profiles, the same criteria established for *Task 1* were applied; i.e., reality, consistency of the information provided within the items and shared syllable count. It should be specified that the assignment of academic status followed a semi-random procedure, designed to avoid reproducing gender stereotypes and biases in the items.

Following these general remarks, the linguistic peculiarities characterizing the nonbinary items in *Task 2* are presented in Box 11. For the formulation of the nonbinary plural condition, we stuck to the basic principles established for the nonbinary singular condition.

Box 11 Nonbinary plural item 1

Lə candidatə sono *ricercatorə post doc*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* sono risultatə vincitorə di bandi. Lə candidatə propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Analisi economica del consumatore sul piano comportamentale*, la cui finalità è di *potenziare l'etichettatura dei prodotti alimentari, nonché i consumi sostenibili e salutistici, contro l'obesità*. Lə candidatə saranno impegnatə nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *12* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Londra, Regno Unito*.
Tuttə lə candidatə si sono dedicatə a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni. Sono autorə di *2* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are postdoctoral researchers.NB.PL. In previous years, [they] were never announced.NB.PL winners.NB.PL of a funding program. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are proposing the following research project: *Consumer Behavior Analysis*; the aim of which is to enhance food labeling, as well as sustainable and healthy consumption, in order to fight obesity. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL will be engaged.NB.PL in the research activity for a period of 12 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of London, Great Britain.
All.NB.PL (the.NB.PL) candidates.NB.PL have been committed.NB.PL to this field of research for 3 years. [They] have authored.NB.PL 2 scientific publications on the subject.'

For the creation of the determiner, we deliberately drew from the feminine inventory because of an increased phonological accessibility, as previously claimed. For the formation of nouns (mostly occupational terms that end with a different suffix depending on whether they are masculine or feminine), we settled on the masculine form as the basis for the modeling, inasmuch it is more easily disguised, as can be seen from the nouns that appear in the description reported in Box 11. Hence, with regard to the choice of the agentive suffix to

6 The identifying entries listed here are molded on the information needed to profile a research group.

be molded (cf. Section 1.4), we opted for *ricercatorə* 'researchers. NB.PL' and *vincitorə* 'winners.NB.PL', based on the masculine form *-tori*, and we did not adopt the construction from the feminine suffix *-trici*, the result of which, i.e., *ricercatricə* 'researchers.NB.PL', would have directed toward a feminine interpretation of the referent more straightforwardly.

As for the neutral condition of the plural task **[box 12]**, the noun phrase *i membri del gruppo di ricerca* 'members of the research team' was chosen because *membri* 'members' can be understood as referring to both female and male referents.

Box 12 Neutral plural item 1

I membri del gruppo di ricerca *beneficiano di un assegno di ricerca*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* hanno vinto alcun bando. Tali membri propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio di nuovi alimenti ed ingredienti alimentari*, la cui finalità è di *promuovere la salute attraverso il miglioramento dell'alimentazione e dello stile di vita*. L'attività di raccolta dati di ricerca richiederà un impegno complessivo pari a un periodo di *12* mesi, e per il loro progetto è prevista la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Amsterdam, Paesi Bassi*. Tutti i membri si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni e vantano un numero di *4* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'Members of the research team are currently conducting research by means of a research grant. They have never won a funding program before. Members are proposing the following research project: *Study of new foods and new ingredients*, the aim of which is to promote health through improved nutrition and lifestyle. The research activity of data collection will require a total commitment of 12 months. The project involves collaboration with the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. All members have been working in this field of research for 3 years and count 4 scientific publications on the topic.'

3.4.2.2 Visual Materials

As we are dealing with a sentence-picture matching task, we now address the issues that regard the images, ranging from the grouping criteria to the display modes.

The visual part of *Task 1* involves groupings of six total images following the descriptions. More specifically, each verbal stimulus was assigned six images. Two of the six images portray a person rated as male, two depict a female person, the remaining a nonbinary. As said above (cf. Section 3.3.1), images were taken from the photo array used by Bradley and colleagues (2019) and shared with us by Evan D. Bradley, later rated by an independent sample of participants, which led to the same classification as in the original experiment.

In compliance with the composition illustrated above, we randomly assigned six images to each item, making sure that no image appeared

more than twice throughout the experiment. The order of appearance of the images was also randomized across items.

The structure of each experimental item in *Task 1* is thus composed of the verbal stimulus (indicated as *prompt* in Table 7), marked for either the feminine, masculine, or nonbinary gender or else unmarked for gender (i.e., neutral condition), and the set of identified images.

Table 7 Masculine singular item 2 (prompt and set of images)

PROMPT
Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del *primo* anno in *Marketing per la tutela dei beni culturali in Italia*. In magistrale, si è laureato con un voto di *101*. La media ponderata del candidato, in magistrale, era di *25.2*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento del candidato è *Antropologia culturale e artistica*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà: *Digitalizzazione delle visite museali: il caso degli Uffizi*. Il candidato *non* vanta pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ma esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stato tutor di *3* corsi. Il candidato risulta regolarmente iscritto per l'anno accademico in corso. 'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG in Cultural Heritage Marketing. [He] graduated.M.SG from the MA program with 101. The weighted average mark of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG during the master was 25.2. The leading discipline of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG in the academic arena is Anthropology of Art. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *Digitization and virtual experience of museums: a case study of the Uffizi.* The.M.SG candidate.M.SG has no publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [he] mentored.M.SG in three courses. The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is duly enrolled.M.SG in the current academic year.'
SET OF IMAGES
 A B C D E F

As to the display modes, pictures are shown in sequential order, equally distant from one another. Depending on the device used, the size of the images will necessarily vary. A letter appears under each photo as its identifier. This way, participants can enter the letter corresponding to the selected image as an answer, as illustrated in Section 3.4.3.

In *Task 2*, exposure to one and the same image increases significantly, as six different groups are assigned to each item while still drawing from the same array of photographs. Every group is composed of three people embodying a specific gender. Group

composition with respect to gender is illustrated in detail in Table 8. The same person never appears more than once within the same item, yet every image belonging to the male and female categories shows up again seven times throughout the experiment, as opposed to the nonbinary photos appearing only four times. We chose two-gender groups composed of male and female members to test whether the suffix -ə would be used to refer to mixed-gender groups without nonbinary participants.

Table 8 Gender composition of the set of images accompanying each plural condition

Group	***Gender Composition***
Male Group	M, M, M
Female Group	F, F, F
Nonbinary Group	NB, NB, NB
Mixed Group	M, F, NB
Two-gender Group A	M, M, F
Two-gender Group B	M, F, F

The grouping criterion in *Task 2* is twofold; as to the need to achieve a certain gender representation, calibrated among groups, academic position had to be added, which dictates certain combinations that must take factors such as seniority into account. In assigning the images, attention was therefore devoted to certain aspects related to physical features, such as age range. This way, higher academic positions (e.g., full professors as opposed to postdoctoral researchers) could be preferably matched with older people. This meant that in the presence of descriptions concerning full professors, for instance, we made sure that among the proposed groups, more adult-looking subjects were possibly present.

As with *Task 1*, Table 9 shows the structure of an item made up of the verbal stimulus (i.e., prompt) and the sets of images to be selected.

Table 9 Nonbinary plural item 1 (prompt and set of images)[7]

PROMPT
Lə candidatə sono *ricercatorə post doc*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* sono risultatə vincitorə di bandi. Lə candidatə propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Analisi economica del consumatore sul piano comportamentale*, la cui finalità è di *potenziare l'etichettatura dei prodotti alimentari, nonché i consumi sostenibili e salutistici, contro l'obesità*. Lə candidatə saranno impegnatə nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *12* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Londra, Regno Unito*. Tuttə lə candidatə si sono dedicatə a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni. Sono autorə di *2* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento. 'The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are postdoctoral researchers.NB.PL. In previous years, [they] were never announced.NB.PL winners.NB.PL of a funding program. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are proposing the following research project: *Consumer Behavior Analysis*; the aim of which is to enhance food labeling, as well as sustainable and healthy consumption, in order to fight obesity. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL will be engaged.NB.PL in the research activity for a period of 12 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of London, Great Britain. All.NB.PL (the.NB.PL) candidates.NB.PL have been committed.NB.PL to this field of research for 3 years. [They] have authored.NB.PL 2 scientific publications on the subject.'
SETS OF IMAGES

7 Based on Table 8, Male group corresponds to letter D, Female group corresponds to letter E, Nonbinary group corresponds to letter F, Mixed group corresponds to letter A, Two-gender group A corresponds to letter C, Two-gender group B corresponds to letter B.

Having tripled the number of images appearing in each item with respect to *Task 1*, the spatial arrangement of images was designed differently for *Task 2*. Photos of the same size were visually grouped into two vertical blocks, standing one next to the other, each hosting three independent groups. Photo identifiers are letters placed next to the opening image of each group. Groups' positioning was randomized across items. However, once the spatial arrangement of images was established for each of the eight items, this was replicated across sessions, with only the order of appearance of the items being randomized.

3.4.3 Procedure

The experimental paradigm consists of a sentence-picture matching task (adapted from Bradley et al. 2019). Each participant was asked to: (i) read the prompt, (ii) rate the academic profile, and (iii) select the photo of the described subject. One part of the task tested the singular condition and the other the plural condition, corresponding to *Task 1* and *Task 2*, respectively. *Task 1* and *Task 2* were administered separately, one after the other. The order of administration was counterbalanced across participants. In addition, two online questionnaires, i.e., the *Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian* (SILUI) and the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Hafbits, were administered to the participants. The experiment and the online questionnaires were generated and administered through *Gorilla Experiment Builder,*[8] an open-source platform capable of running online behavioral studies while also measuring response times. Each participant was involved in a single experimental session, with no time limitation, comprising the sentence-picture matching task (i.e., *Task 1* + *Task 2*), the SILUI questionnaire and the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits. Participants' responses were automatically recorded and subsequently manually transcribed by the experimenter.

Data collection took place between November and December 2023. The experiment was carried out autonomously by each participant, who received the access link on their email address, and after reading and accepting an informed consent form, in compliance with the regulation (EU) 2016/679, went through the study at their own pace. The experiment lasted about 30 minutes, with remarkable differences in the actual execution time due to possible interruptions during completion. Participants were highly recommended to use a laptop given the abundance of visual and textual stimuli that each

8 Available at: www.gorilla.sc.

screen contained in the sentence-picture matching task. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, every item indeed includes (i) the verbal stimulus (i.e., prompt); (ii) the three rating questions each accompanied by their corresponding slider (on which to express their judgment by placing the cursor on the detected value); (iii) the images together with a single-text entry where to insert the letter corresponding to the selected image. The English translations of the instructions and the verbal stimuli are given in Appendix B.

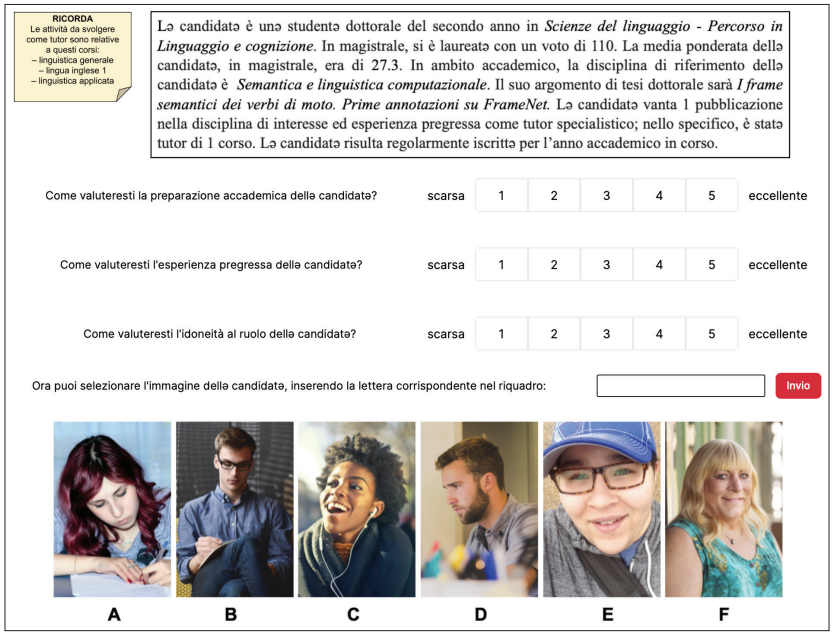


Figure 2 Screenshot of one nonbinary singular item as it appears on Gorilla

Figure 3 Screenshot of one nonbinary plural item as it appears on Gorilla

3.5 Assessing the Relationship Between the Usage of Sexist Language and the Attitudes Toward It: Is There Room for an Inclusive Language?

This section presents the structure of the questionnaire on the *Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian* (SILUI). The starting point was the *Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General* (IASNL-G), designed, tested and distributed by Parks and Roberton (2000), aimed at measuring (i) the usage of sexist language, (ii) the attitudes toward sexist language, and (iii) the willingness to use inclusive language. The IASNL-G was translated into Italian, and the questions were adapted to the Italian political and socio-cultural context. All modifications are illustrated item by item.

The questionnaire consists of three sections: 1. "Convinzioni personali sull'uso sessista della lingua italiana" 'Beliefs About the Sexist Use of the Italian Language' (Items 1-13); 2. "Riconoscere la lingua sessista" 'Recognition of Sexist Language' (Items 14-17); 3. "Apertura all'uso del linguaggio inclusivo" 'Willingness to Use Inclusive Language' (Items 18-20). The complete list of items can be found in Appendix C.

A definition of sexist language opens the questionnaire, preceding all sections. The inclusion of an unambiguous definition of the concept,

otherwise subject to multiple possible interpretations, forces the formulation of all responses based on a common explication. The answers are thus interpretable precisely because they refer to a shared, well-defined framework (Parks, Roberton 2000).

An addition was made to the original definition: a specification concerning the explicit mention of all those who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender.[9] A sexist use of language is in fact also identified in the failure to recognize the population that does not fit in either one of the two canonical categories (i.e., male and female). Therefore, it is a deliberate attempt to include nonbinary people among the populations affected by sexist language use. The new version of the guiding definition reads as follows:

> *Per la compilazione del questionario si prega di utilizzare la seguente definizione:*
> *L'uso sessista della lingua concerne parole, frasi ed espressioni che tracciano distinzioni superflue tra maschi e femmine o che escludono, ridicolizzano o sminuiscono uno dei generi e ignorano completamente la possibilità che ci siano persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere (non binary).*
>
> 'Please use the following definition in completing this questionnaire: Sexist language includes words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender and completely ignore the possibility that there are people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender (nonbinary).'

The first section of the SILUI, "Beliefs About the Sexist Use of the Italian Language", sets out to explore the respondents' "thoughts and opinions about sexist/nonsexist language" (Parks, Roberton 2000, 419), so as to draw a picture of the individual's view on the phenomenon under investigation. Among the 13 items contained in the beliefs section, there are some general questions that have remained unchanged, as they explore the participant's position with respect to broader issues applicable to any language. Here respondents are asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale how much they disagree (1=strongly disagree) or agree (5=strongly agree) with statements concerning the scope of the examined phenomenon, its

9 The original definition reads as follows: "Sexist language includes words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males *or* exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender" (Parks, Roberton 2000, 434). The added part contains the term *non binary* in parentheses, which is not translated into Italian as the English form is commonly used in Italian as well.

importance, its entrenchment, its dependencies on society, and its connection with politics.

Table 10 shows the SILUI Items juxtaposed with the original IASNL-G Items. In the first column, Blaubergs' (1980) arguments against changing sexist language are reported. Advocated for during the 1970s by scholars, the latter are "still being used by contemporary college students to justify sexist language" (Parks, Roberton 2000, 420).[10] For this reason, they constituted the conceptual framework from which Parks and Roberton (2000) drafted their items.

The items reported in Table 10 were slightly changed in the adaptation process. The table was adapted and modified from Table I reported in Parks and Roberton (2000, 421), only gathering a few sample items. The asterisk signals that those items not contained in the original table have been assigned a particular Blaubergs' (1980) argument by us.

Table 10 SILUI items juxtaposed with their corresponding original versions (i.e., IASNL-G items), resulting from the arguments identified by Blaubergs (1980)

Blaubergs' Argument	***Identifier***	***SILUI Item***	***IASNL-G Item***
It would destroy historical authenticity and literary works	(3.1)	[Item 2] Non dovremmo cambiare il modo in cui la lingua italiana è stata tradizionalmente scritta e parlata.	We should not change the way the English language has traditionally been written and spoken.
*Language is a trivial concern**	(3.2)	[Item 3] Il linguaggio inclusivo è una questione di poco conto.	Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity.
Change is too difficult, inconvenient, impractical or whatever	(3.3)	[Item 6] La lingua italiana non verrà mai cambiata perché è troppo radicata nella cultura.	The English language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.
Language is a trivial concern	(3.4)	[Item 7] L'eliminazione dell'uso sessista della lingua italiana è un obiettivo importante.	The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.

10 The arguments against inclusive language identified by Blaubergs (1980) are classified as follows: "(1) the 'cross-cultural' argument; (2) the 'language is a trivial concern' argument; (3) the 'freedom of speech/unjustified coercion' argument; (4) the 'sexist language is not sexist' argument; (5) the 'word etymology' argument; (6) the 'appeal to authority' argument; (7) the 'change is too difficult, inconvenient, impractical or whatever' argument; and (8) the 'it would destroy historical authenticity and literary works' argument" (Blaubergs 1980, 135).

Blaubergs' Argument	***Identifier***	***SILUI Item***	***IASNL-G Item***
*Appeal to authority**	(3.5)	[Item 8] Dal momento che le norme editoriali impongono agli autori di articoli di giornale di evitare l'uso di insulti di carattere etnico-razziale dovrebbero imporre un divieto anche sull'uso sessista della lingua.	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid sexist language.
Cross-cultural	(3.6)	[Item 9] L'uso sessista della lingua italiana ha a che fare con il trattamento sessista delle persone nella società italiana.	Sexist language is related to sexist treatment of people in society.
Freedom of speech / Unjustified coercion	(3.7)	[Item 11] Tutti quei professori che pretendono che i loro studenti evitino un uso sessista della lingua italiana non fanno altro che imporre le loro idee politiche sulla classe.	Teachers who require students to use nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.
*Change is too difficult, inconvenient, impractical or whatever**	(3.8)	[Item 12] Anche se il cambiamento è difficile, dovremmo comunque cercare di eliminare l'uso sessista della lingua italiana.	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate sexist language.

A general trend can be detected in the process of item adaptation: explicit reference is always made to Italian in the statements that comprise SILUI, even where the corresponding IASNL-G item reports a general consideration without openly referring to a specific language (see Items 7 (3.4), 9 (3.6), 11 (3.7), 12 (3.8)). Item 3 (3.2) undergoes a different change shown in the overturning of the internal perspective, in that the focus is shifted directly to inclusive language, testing respondents' urgency with respect to this issue.

The items that deviate the most from those of the first section of the IASNL-G are the ones developed *ad hoc* for the purpose of our study, which are analyzed in what follows.

(3.9) [Item 1] Il fatto che Giorgia Meloni si faccia chiamare "il signor presidente" è da considerarsi una scelta sessista.
'Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.'

Item 1 (3.9) overtly displays a sexist language error attributable to the use of the common-gender term *presidente* 'president.SG'

preceded by the masculine expression *il signor* 'the.M.SG Mr.M.SG'.[11] In considering gendered forms of address – "the formal titles used to address an individual in social and professional interactions" (Hord 2016, 15) – the masculine form is therefore preferred over its feminine counterpart, which would simply be *la presidente* 'the.F.SG president.SG', rather than *la signora presidente* 'the.F.SG Mrs.F.SG president.SG'. The item is placed in the political context precisely to stress the pervasiveness of the sexist use of language that has long found fertile ground in the political sphere.

(3.10) [Item 4] Il maschile plurale non è davvero inclusivo, ma dovremmo comunque continuare a usarlo per riferirci a gruppi misti di persone (es. maschi, femmine e persone non binary) perché risulta più immediato.
'The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.'

Item 4 (3.10) raises the question of the immediacy of language, as to say, that of favoring non-inclusive instances of language that are straightforward over ones that are truly representative of the entire population, including minorities, and that most times result in more elaborate forms. This stance moves from the function of effective communication that language is called upon to perform. In the present case, we are dealing with the adoption of a unique form (i.e., generic masculine) that incorporates a multiplicity that is not visible, namely that of gender diversity (cf. Section 1.5). While admitting that the implemented strategy is not inclusive, but rather belongs to the category of false generics, its ease could still justify its use. Hence, Item 4 (3.10) sets out to establish which of these two sides should prevail (e.g., the representative *vs* utilitarian aspect), once the existence of this double nature is recognized.

(3.11) [Item 5] Se una persona non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere è giusto che ci si riferisca a quella persona con ə: per es. *studentə*.
'When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with ə: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.'

(3.12) [Item 10] Se in un gruppo di persone ci sono maschi, femmine e persone non binary, è giusto che ci si riferisca a loro con ə: per es. non *gli studenti* ma *lə studentə*.

11 Note that the Italian masculine noun *signor* is not an indicator of marital status but a form conveying prestige, similar to English *Mr.*

'If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with ə: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.'

Items 5 (3.11) and 10 (3.12) are closely intertwined in that they both address the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* in singular and plural contexts. In Item 5 (3.11), the function of this suffix can be traced to the singular exclusive representation of the nonbinary population (i.e., specific meaning). In Item 10 (3.12), the suffix *-ə* is representative of a mixed group, including male, female and nonbinary people, hence presenting itself as the inclusive plural ending (i.e., generic meaning).

(3.13) [Item 13] È giusto che sulla carta d'identità dei minori restino le diciture "madre" e "padre" e saltino le qualifiche neutre "genitore 1" e "genitore 2".
'It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".'

The content of this item concerns the wording to be included in the birth certificate of children of transgender or homosexual couples and draws again from the political arena.[12] There is in fact no consensus among European countries on how to indicate persons who have transgender parental status in civil records relating to a child. Item 13 (3.13) reflects the proposal put forward on this issue, which was never approved by the Italian government. Replacing long-standing terms such as *madre* 'mother' and *padre* 'father' with *genitore 1* 'parent 1' and *genitore 2* 'parent 2' forms the core of the proposal. The latter terms indeed qualify as generics in all respects, as such terms do not impose identification with the role of mother and father by those involved in the childcare. At the same time, mother and father also dictate a precise gender classification, which is problematic when the composition of the family does not fully embody the concept of a traditional family. Since these are terms well entrenched in the collective imagination, proposing their replacement with neutral terms is but a daunting task. It is precisely because the topic raises so many tricky questions that we were curious to see what the respondents' stand was on the issue.

The second section of the SILUI, i.e., "Recognition of Sexist Language", is built on four "designation errors" (APA 1983). Respondents are instructed to express the degree of sexism underlying each highlighted linguistic form on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'not at all sexist' and 5 'clearly sexist'. The first error reported in Item 14 (3.14) has to

12 The debate about this issue was taken from the article published on April 14, 2023, available at the link `https://ntplusdiritto.ilsole24ore.com/art/corte-edu-no-genitore-1-e-genitore-2-sostituzione-padre-e-madre-la-transizione-genere-AE1OZOHD`.

do with incorrect gender selection. The feminine given name *Marta* contrasts with the past participle marked for the masculine.

(3.14) [Item 14] Marta è una donna transgender. È nat**o** nel 1986.
'Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.'

Item 15 (3.15) shows the assignment of a binary gender marker, which is in agreement with the feminine given name (i.e., Lucia), to a person who does not identify with the binary distinction of gender.

(3.15) [Item 15] Lucia non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere. Lucia è cresciut**a** a Modena.
'Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.'

Items 16 (3.16) and 17 (3.17) are the first to engage with the domain of social stereotypes. Here, traditionally male and female occupations are introduced separately (i.e., attorney and teacher, respectively). More specifically, an instance of occupational prestige is reported in Item 16 (3.16), for which we opted for the masculine term *avvocato* 'attorney.M.SG' to designate a female referent, identified with the name *Serena*. Item 17 (3.17), in contrast, sees the inclusion of "the feminine generic" (Pires 2020, 119) (cf. Section 2.2.2) – a phenomenon that fits within the framework of the "feminine resolution" (p. 117) – which reflects "the gendered nature of the workplace" (i.e., primary school) showing a statistically significant female predominance (Crawley 2014, 2). In other words, the presence of male teachers in primary schools hides behind the female majority, hence allowing for reasonably favoring a female representation, which, while reversing the canonical course, is still discriminating against the male population, being a minority in this particular case.

(3.16) [Item 16] Serena ha superato con successo l'abilitazione all'avvocatura. Adesso Serena è un avvocat**o**.
'Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.'

(3.17) [Item 17] **Le** maestr**e** delle scuole elementari tendono a dare tanto spazio alle attività ludiche.
'The.F.PL elementary school teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.'

The third section, i.e., "Willingness to Use Inclusive Language", does not introduce new uses of the suffix being studied; rather, it taps into what has been advanced so far in an attempt to measure the individual's predisposition to accommodate these uses. The prompt is to express their willingness to adopt specific strategies under the three

conditions outlined. Specifically, respondents are asked to indicate how willing they are to accommodate the practices described by using a 5-point Likert scale (1= 'very unwilling' – 5= 'very willing'). For the first condition, the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* as representative of the solely nonbinary population is applied to the case of the plural. Previously introduced with reference to the singular (cf. (3.11)), Item 18 (3.18) shows the plural exclusive nonbinary ending along with the splitting strategy, which involves the explicit mention of all three gender categories sequentially (Giusti 2022; cf. Section 2.2.1):

(3.18) [Item 18] Quanto saresti disponibile a iniziare una mail con: *cari studenti*, *care studentesse e carə studentə* se sai che tra i destinatari sono presenti maschi, femmine e persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere?
'How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?'

As opposed to the exclusive use of the suffix *-ə* to designate a particular population (i.e., nonbinary) found in Item 18 (3.18), Item 19 (3.19) shows an inclusive usage of the suffix *-ə*, thus encompassing multiple specific representations (i.e., male, female, nonbinary). The result is a single, short form that opts for the nonbinary ending precisely to indicate its integral participation. Such a function coincides exactly with the one in Item 10 (3.12).

(3.19) [Item 19] Quanto saresti disponibile a iniziare una mail con: *carə studentə* se sai che tra i destinatari sono presenti maschi, femmine e persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere?
'How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?'

When it comes to the function assigned to the innovative suffix *-ə*, there is also exact correspondence between Item 5 (3.11) and Item 20 (3.20), in that they both adopt the suffix to refer to the singular exclusive representation of the nonbinary population only.

(3.20) [Item 20] Quanto saresti disponibile a utilizzare il termine "candidatə" al posto di "candidato" quando il referente non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere?
'How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?'

As for the implemented scoring system, also borrowed from Parks and Roberton (2000, 423), all items "were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale. High scores (4-5) indicated a positive attitude toward inclusive language; low scores (1-2) indicated a negative attitude toward inclusive language. A score of 3 indicated neutrality or uncertainty". Items 2 (3.1), 3 (3.2), 4 (3.10), 6 (3.3), 11 (3.7) and 13 (3.13) were reverse-scored.

3.6 Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

Having determined (i) the respondents' personal views on the sexist use of language, (ii) their ability to detect instances of this particular use, and (iii) their openness to inclusive language by means of the SILUI, a further level of analysis is added by looking into their reading preferences and habits, in an attempt to uncover their actual exposure to the phenomenon of inclusive language. Through these data, we could indeed potentially establish a correlation between the degree of familiarity with inclusive language and the intention and commitment to employ it or, conversely, to reject it.

For the construction of the 14-item *Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits*, some of the elements were borrowed from existing, validated instruments, others were created for the purposes of our research. Items 1-8 of the questionnaire, given in (3.21)-(3.28) and devoted to the reading practice at large, are the result of the *ad hoc* design, or, where specified otherwise, the adaptation of questions taken from standardized surveys, operated by Cerutti (2023). Items 9-14, given in (3.29)-(3.34) and revolving around the strategies of inclusive language available in Italian, were instead formulated by us by building on the structure of some of the questions proposed by Cerutti (2023).

The items that make up the first part can be further classified into three categories reflecting the three areas explored by Cecil Smith (1990) in the *Adult Survey of Reading Attitudes* (ASRA), namely, "Reading Habits" (i.e., Items 1-6, given in (3.21)-(3.26)), "Reading Attitudes" (i.e., Item 7 (3.27)), and "Perceptions About Reading" (i.e., Item 8 (3.28)).

Item 1 (3.21) uncovers the reasons underlying the act of reading, distinguishable into obligation (i.e., for studying purposes/for work) or pleasure (i.e., for leisure, in one's spare time). As attested by literature, reading in one's spare time correlates positively with the improvement of text comprehension skills (Benevides, Peterson 2010; Mol, Bus 2011; McGeown et al. 2015).

(3.21) [Item 1] Per quali motivi leggi? Puoi indicare una o due opzioni.
- o Per studio / Per lavoro
- o Per svago, nel tempo libero

'Why do you read?
- o For studying purposes / for work
- o For leisure, in my spare time'

Adapted from Cecil Smith's (1990) survey, Item 2 (3.22) digs into readers' familiarity with different text genres. Respondents are asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-scale item with 8 answers how often they are confronted with different text genres, ranging from school/university textbooks and scientific literature to technical documentation, fiction, nonfiction, periodical press, online information or other. Should a certain degree of familiarity with the same type of text presented in this experiment be found (i.e., technical documentation), it will be considered a factor of advantage in text processing, which could partially disguise the interference exerted by the innovative suffix introduced.

(3.22) [Item 2] Con che frequenza leggi le seguenti tipologie di testo?

1. Libri di testo scolastici / manuali universitari	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
2. Letteratura scientifica (pubblicazioni / articoli scientifici)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
3. Documentazione tecnica (circolari, normative, manuali d'uso…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
4. Narrativa (romanzi, racconti…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
5. Saggistica	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
6. Stampa periodica (quotidiani, riviste…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
7. Informazioni online (argomenti vari: attualità, cucina, sport, cultura, viaggi, moda...)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
8. Altro (specificare): ……	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

'How often do you read the following types of text?

1. School / university textbooks	never (1)	very often (5)
2. Scientific literature (academic papers)	never (1)	very often (5)
3. Technical documentation (regulations and regulatory circulars, how-to guides…)	never (1)	very often (5)
4. Fiction (novels, tales…)	never (1)	very often (5)
5. Nonfiction	never (1)	very often (5)
6. Periodical press (newspaper, magazine…)	never (1)	very often (5)
7. Online information (various topics: current affairs, cooking, sports, culture, travel, fashion...)	never (1)	very often (5)
8. Other (please specify): ……	never (1)	very often (5)'

Time spent reading is one of the factors contributing to profiling the expert reader. According to their level of expertise, readers will indeed presumably treat linguistic innovations differently and be drawn by them in different ways. Item 3 (3.23) looks at the overall time spent reading on average each day (including reading for study, work and pleasure), by asking respondents to think in terms of hours. A multiple-choice format was chosen specifically to offer more response options and thus obtain a more granular and detailed measure of participants' reading time (Cerutti 2023).

(3.23) [Item 3] Quanto tempo dedichi alla lettura, in media, in un giorno?
- o Meno di un'ora
- o Da una a due ore
- o Da due a tre ore
- o Da tre a quattro ore
- o Più di quattro ore

'How much time do you spend reading each day?
- o Less than 1 hour
- o 1-2 hours
- o 2-3 hours
- o 3-4 hours
- o More than 4 hours'

Item 4 (3.24) alludes to the size of respondents' reading pile. Reading in one's free time, with particular reference to novels, has been found to discriminate between expert and nonexpert readers, as reported in several studies (e.g., Mol, Bus 2011; McGeown et al. 2015).

(3.24) [Item 4] Quanti libri hai letto, nel tempo libero, nell'ultimo anno?
'How many books have you read this year (in your spare time)? ……'

Items 5 (3.25) and 6 (3.26) explore the hotly debated opposition: print *vs* digital reading. Frequency of use with respect to different media is first addressed in Item 5, with Item 6 being confined to the preferences for the media to read from. Among the listed digital media there are e-readers, computers, tablets and smartphones, in that they differ in screen size, brightness, and ability to interact with the text and modify its layout to make reading smoother (Cerutti 2023). One of the most relevant aspects of digital reading is its being subject to linguistic experimentation, as a consequence of its increased diffusion and greater responsiveness to the emerging sociolinguistic phenomena. For this reason, digital reading is particularly interesting for the purpose of our study. In addition, since the experimental procedure we adopted relies entirely on onscreen reading, it is deemed necessary to investigate respondents'

habits, as previous experience or mere preference for either mode could affect performance.[13]

(3.25) [Item 5] Con che frequenza leggi su queste tipologie di supporto?

Carta stampata	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Smartphone	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Computer	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Tablet	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
E-reader	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

'How often do you read from the following media?

Print media	never (1)	very often (5)
Smartphone	never (1)	very often (5)
Computer	never (1)	very often (5)
Tablet	never (1)	very often (5)
E-reader	never (1)	very often (5)'

(3.26) [Item 6] In generale, preferisci leggere:
- o su supporto cartaceo
- o su supporto digitale
- o non ho preferenze

'In general, you would rather read:
- o on paper
- o on screen
- o I don't have a preference'

Item 7 (3.27) looks into respondents' attitudes toward reading. The act of reading is here being evaluated from a personal perspective.

(3.27) [Item 7] Quanto sei d'accordo con queste affermazioni? (scegli un'opzione da 1=per niente d'accordo a 5=molto d'accordo)

Leggere è un'attività piacevole	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è un'attività noiosa	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è utile	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è faticoso	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)

13 This consideration reflects the one reported in Cerutti 2023.

'Indicate on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) how much you agree with the following statements:

Reading is an enjoyable activity	strongly disagree (1)	strongly agree (5)
Reading is a boring activity	strongly disagree (1)	strongly agree (5)
Reading is important	strongly disagree (1)	strongly agree (5)
Reading is hard	strongly disagree (1)	strongly agree (5)'

Metacognitive in nature, Item 8 (3.28) was adapted from Cecil Smith's (1990) survey. It urges respondents to make a self-assessment of their own competence by drawing from a given definition. Complex as it is, the question is narrowed down to the aspect of integrating multiple pieces of knowledge, which is a crucial skill in profiling the expert reader.[14]

(3.28) [Item 8] "Un lettore esperto ha la capacità di integrare le informazioni di un testo con ciò che già conosce."
In base a questa affermazione, che tipo di lettore ti consideri?

poco esperto				molto esperto
1	2	3	4	5

'"An expert reader has the ability to integrate information from a text with what they already know."
Based on this statement, what kind of reader do you consider yourself to be?

inexperienced				very experienced
1	2	3	4	5'

As previously anticipated, Items 9-14, given in (3.29)-(3.34), were designed *ad hoc* to measure the exposure to inclusive Italian. Item 9 (3.29) tests respondents' prior knowledge of the examined phenomenon to prepare the ground for the specific strategies addressed in the next items. It serves to crucially establish whether or not it is the first time respondents are confronted with these language innovations. The binary response format thus imposes immediate categorization (i.e., first exposure *vs* previous exposure(s)).

(3.29) [Item 9] Prima di prendere parte a questo esperimento, avevi già sentito parlare di linguaggio inclusivo?
sì / no

14 The wording in Item 8 (3.28) *un lettore esperto* 'a.M.SG reader.M.SG experienced.M.SG' appeared in Cerutti's questionnaire and was reproduced *verbatim* to ensure methodological soundness, despite awareness of the gender issues it raises.

'Have you ever heard of inclusive language before taking part in this experiment? yes / no'

With Items 10 (3.30) and 11 (3.31), respondents are encouraged to take a closer look at the strategies proposed for Italian. They are asked to indicate if, and how often, they have encountered each of the strategies listed in the table on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), considering the full range of formal and informal texts to which they are exposed in their everyday life. Then, they are asked to add whichever strategy they know of that does not appear in the list.[15]

(3.30) [Item 10] Hai già incontrato le seguenti strategie di linguaggio inclusivo nelle tue precedenti letture?

Coordinazione di termini femminili e maschili (*splitting*)	*Salve a tutte e a tutti*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Nomi collettivi (*oscuramento*)	*Salve a tutte le persone qui presenti*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"*" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tutt**	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"@" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tutt@*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"_" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tutt_*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"x" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tuttx*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"u" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tuttu*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"ə" come terminazione finale	*Salve a tuttə*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

'Have you ever come across the following strategies of inclusive language in your previous readings?

Coordination of feminine and masculine terms (*splitting*)	*Hello everyone*.F.PL *and everyone*.M.PL	never (1)	very often (5)
Collective nouns (*oscuramento*)	Hello to all the people here	never (1)	very often (5)
"*" as the word ending	Hello everyon*	never (1)	very often (5)
"@" as the word ending	Hello everyon@	never (1)	very often (5)
"_" as the word ending	Hello everyon_	never (1)	very often (5)
"*x*" as the word ending	Hello everyonx	never (1)	very often (5)
"u" as the word ending	Hello everyonu	never (1)	very often (5)
"ə" as the word ending	Hello everyonə	never (1)	very often (5)'

15 Please refer to Chapter 1 for the reasons underlying the identification of the strategies shown in the table of Item 10. Note that *tutti*.M.PL 'everyone' bears a gender marker, with its feminine counterpart being *tutte*.F.PL.

(3.31) [Item 11] Conosci altre strategie riconducibili al linguaggio inclusivo? ……
'Do you happen to know any other strategies attributable to inclusive language?'

From the compilation of the table, we expect greater recognition of the innovative suffix *-ə*, as it is by far the most debated strategy and the more widely used compared to others. In line with the central role played by the *-ə* suffix in this study, the remaining Items 12-14, given in (3.32)-(3.34), refer to this strategy. In an attempt to measure its outreach, we opted for including another table listing several text genres (cf. (3.22)) for each of which respondents had to mark whether they had witnessed the presence of the *-ə* suffix.

(3.32) [Item 12] Indica in quali tipologie di testo hai già incontrato il simbolo "**ə**" (inserendo una x in corrispondenza della categoria d'interesse)

1. Libri di testo scolastici / manuali universitari	
2. Letteratura scientifica (pubblicazioni / articoli scientifici)	
3. Documentazione tecnica (circolari, normative, manuali d'uso…)	
4. Narrativa (romanzi, racconti…)	
5. Saggistica	
6. Stampa periodica (quotidiani, riviste…)	
7. Informazioni online (argomenti vari: attualità, cucina, sport, cultura, viaggi, moda...)	
8. Social media[1]	
9. Altro (specificare): ……	
1 It was deemed necessary to distinguish between online information, which can refer to either websites or blogs, and social media, by adding this entry to the original list of text genres presented in Item 2.	

'Indicate in what types of text you have already come across the "ə" symbol by placing an x in the corresponding category:

1. School / university textbooks	
2. Scientific literature (academic papers)	
3. Technical documentation (regulations and regulatory circulars, how-to guides…)	
4. Fiction (novels, tales…)	
5. Nonfiction	
6. Periodical press (newspaper, magazine…)	
7. Online information (various topics: current affairs, cooking, sports, culture, travel, fashion...)	
8. Social media	
9. Other (please specify): ……'	

Items 13 (3.33) and 14 (3.34) are strictly intertwined and both present a metacognitive nature. Item 13 (3.33) directly addresses the perception of the respondent who is dealing with the symbol *-ə*, by asking whether it is considered an obstacle to the reading of the word. The same question is further explored by Item 14 (3.34), which in turn consists of two sub-questions, committed to dig a little deeper: the opposition silent *vs* aloud reading is introduced, and so is the distinction between performativity and meaning. The multiple-choice format employed here is aimed to avoid making the question difficult to manage, as this is a rather complex question *per se*. Without a specific focus – made explicit and precisely delimited – , the questions would open up a whole range of considerations that go beyond the scope of our study.

(3.33) [Item 13] Nel complesso, reputi l'inserimento del simbolo "**ə**" a fine parola un elemento di ostacolo alla lettura della parola stessa?

assolutamente no				decisamente sì
1	2	3	4	5

'Overall, do you find the inclusion of the "ə" symbol at the end of the word to be an obstacle to reading the word itself?

absolutely not				absolutely yes
1	2	3	4	5'

(3.34) [Item 14] Prova a leggere questa frase ad alta voce: *Lə candidatə è unə studentə dottorale del secondo anno in Scienze del linguaggio – Percorso in Linguaggio e cognizione*. Ti risulta difficile da pronunciare per via dell'inserimento del simbolo "**ə**"? Ti è chiaro a cosa si riferisce?

- o è difficile da pronunciare ed è difficile capire il suo significato quando leggo
- o è difficile da pronunciare, ma è facile capire il suo significato quando leggo
- o è facile da pronunciare, ma è difficile capire il suo significato quando leggo
- o è facile da pronunciare ed è facile capire il suo significato quando leggo

'Try reading this sentence aloud: *The*.NB.SG *candidate*.NB.SG *is a*.NB.SG *second-year PhD student*.NB.SG *in Language Sciences – Language and Cognition Curriculum*. Do you find it difficult to pronounce because of the inclusion of the "**ə**" symbol? Do you know what it refers to?

- o It is difficult to pronounce, and it is difficult to understand its meaning as I read
- o It is difficult to pronounce, but it is easy to understand its meaning as I read
- o It is easy to pronounce, but it is difficult to understand its meaning as I read
- o It is easy to pronounce, and it is easy to understand its meaning as I read'

Item 14 (3.34) represents the only data we collected regarding the viability of the proposal at the level of phonetic production. It attempts to measure – albeit indirectly, through personal judgment – the articulatory accessibility of the suffix -*ə*.

4 Data Analysis and Results

Index 4.1 Introduction. – 4.2 Results of the Sentence-Picture Matching Task. – 4.3 Results of the Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian (SILUI). – 4.4 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits. – 4.5 Reading Experience and Response Times: A Correlational Analysis.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the experiment. The results of the sentence-picture matching task (SPMT) are presented in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 focuses on the data collected through the questionnaire *Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian* (SILUI), whereas the data concerning the *Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits* are reported in Section 4.4. Section 4.5 presents a correlational analysis between participants' reading experience and their response times.

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/004

4.2 Results of the Sentence-Picture Matching Task

In this section, we provide the response coding and the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. *Analysis 1* considers accuracy with any all-inclusive, mixed-gender representation of the plural suffix *-ə*. *Analysis 2* considers accuracy only when the representation specifically includes at least one nonbinary individual, thus reflecting a nonbinary-inclusive interpretation of the plural suffix *-ə*. Response times are the object of *Analysis 3*.

4.2.1 Response Coding

We assessed the process of gender assignment via a sentence-picture matching task in which participants were asked to match each verbal stimulus with a picture (depicting the gender of the described referent).

With respect to the singular condition, response correctness was determined by a perfect match between the gender information found in the verbal stimulus and the gender of the subject appearing in the selected picture. For instance, when the verbal stimulus describing a single male referent (e.g., *Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del primo anno* 'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG') was matched with one of the pictures that were previously rated as male (cf. Section 3.3), the response scored one point. Analogously, a verbal stimulus introducing a female candidate must be associated with a picture rated as female in order to be scored as correct. The same procedure applies to the nonbinary condition: the verbal stimulus presenting a nonbinary candidate must find perfect correspondence with one of the two pictures rated as nonbinary. This way, the exclusive use of the innovative suffix *-ə* is being tested. Whenever a mismatch is found (e.g., a picture rated as 'female' is selected to represent the male referent described in the verbal stimulus), the score is zero. In the neutral condition, any picture matched with the verbal stimulus is considered correct and assigned one point, as the stimulus lacking any gender-related information allows for a valid association with any gender.

With regard to the plural, the feminine plural condition is the only one that admits one single correct answer, namely the selection of the female-only group (i.e., FFF). The masculine plural condition can refer to both a male-only group (i.e., MMM), recalling the specific meaning of the masculine form (cf. Section 1.5), and a mixed-gender group which contains a male member (i.e., MMF, FFM, MFNB). This second choice serves as a measure of the generic meaning of the masculine form (cf. Section 1.5). Thus, four possible answers can

score one point in the masculine plural condition (i.e., the selection of the following groups of pictures: MMM; MMF; FFM; MFNB).

Just as many alternatives are available for the nonbinary plural condition: namely, selection of a nonbinary-only group (i.e., NBNBNB), or one that is composed of a nonbinary individual together with a male and female members (i.e., MFNB), or groups that see the presence of male and female members only (i.e., MMF, FFM). In this condition, we used two response coding procedures and we ran two analyses. In *Analysis 1* (cf. Section 4.2.2.1), the selection of groups with only female and male members (i.e., MMF, FFM) for the nonbinary plural condition was scored as correct, while in *Analysis 2* (cf. Section 4.2.2.2), these groups were excluded, thus scored as incorrect. These two groups therefore appear in brackets in Table 11. This criterion enables us to clearly distinguish the activation of an all-encompassing, mixed-gender meaning – which does not necessarily imply the presence of a nonbinary person – from that of a meaning specifically inclusive of nonbinary individuals. As a matter of fact, selection of a group that is deprived of nonbinary members stands for the adoption of the quintessential generic interpretation of plural *-ə*, activated when referring to mixed gender without any direct reference to the nonbinary condition. Although this even broader, more inclusive use of the suffix has not been explicitly addressed in previous literature, we chose to investigate it here, as the suffix can also yield a mixed-gender plural interpretation that excludes reference to nonbinary individuals.

Finally, as with the singular, neutral plural items can be matched with any gender, which means that any image is allowed.

Table 11 provides a more effective visualization of the output of the implemented response coding process.

Table 11 The correct gender composition of the images for each condition

Condition	M.SG	F.SG	NB.SG	neutral.SG	M.PL	F.PL	NB.PL	neutral.PL
Gender (compos.) of the image	M	F	NB	M;F;NB	M,M,M; M,M,F; F,F,M; M,F,NB	F,F,F	NB,NB,NB; (M,M,F); (F,F,M); M,F,NB	M,M,M; F,F,F; NB,NB,NB; M,M,F; F,F,M; M,F,NB

4.2.2 Quantitative Analysis of the Data

To the purpose of answering the research questions in (I) and (II) (cf. Section 3.2), concerning the referents assigned to *-ə* and the actual duration of the assignment process when dealing with such a

morphological innovation, three different analyses were carried out. Response accuracy was tested by means of *Analyses 1* and *2*. The two analyses were performed to check whether there is a difference in response accuracy (scores) that depends on (i) the gender of the item (i.e., masculine, feminine, nonbinary), (ii) the number of the item (i.e., singular, plural), (iii) the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa). The formulation of a slightly different scoring system with respect to the nonbinary plural condition distinguishes *Analysis 1* from *Analysis 2*. As stated in the previous section, in *Analysis 1*, a response that matches mixed groups consisting of only female and male members (i.e., MMF and FFM groups) with the nonbinary plural condition was scored as correct, in addition to those that contain a nonbinary referent (i.e., MFNB). Conversely, in *Analysis 2* the presence of at least one nonbinary person within groups was thus appointed as the discriminating factor for establishing response correctness. It follows that whenever a MMF or FFM group was selected to represent the nonbinary plural condition, such a response was scored as incorrect. A summary of the two analyses is provided in Table 12.

Table 12 Type of measure and scoring system specificity for Analyses 1 and 2

Scoring	**Analysis 1**	**Analysis 2**
Measure	Accuracy	
Scoring system specificity	MMF-FFM inclusion in NB.PL condition	MMF-FFM exclusion from NB.PL condition

Analysis 3 set out to detect any effect on participants' response times exerted by (i) the gender of the item (i.e., masculine, feminine, nonbinary), (ii) the number of the item (i.e., singular or plural condition), and (iii) the order of administration of the tasks. The underlying assumption is that the conditions with the longest recorded times might have imposed interpretational problems for participants.

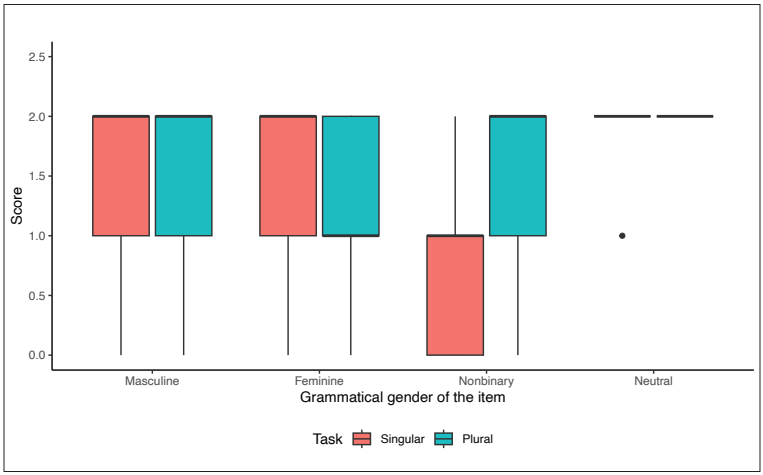
4.2.2.1 *Analysis 1*: Measuring Accuracy with an *All*-Inclusive, Mixed-Gender Representation of the Plural Suffix *-ə*

Considering the two tasks, participants performed differently depending on the gender and number of the item, showing decreasing scores in the nonbinary condition. In Table 13, descriptive statistics for all conditions are shown.

Table 13 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values for the SPMT, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
F.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
NB.SG	0.7250	0.7626569	1	2	0
neutral.SG	1.9875	0.1118034	2	2	1
M.PL	1.6625	0.5498849	2	2	0
F.PL	1.1750	0.7758213	1	2	0
NB.PL	1.5250	0.6157223	2	2	0
neutral.PL	2.0000	0.0000000	2	2	2

Graph 2 shows the mean distribution of the scores, depending on the grammatical gender and number of the item.



Graph 2 Distributions of the SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

As can be seen in Table 13 and Graph 2, participants obtained the lowest mean score in the nonbinary singular condition (0.72). The scores obtained in the masculine and feminine singular conditions are higher and identical to each other (1.48). Scores for feminine and masculine conditions differ in the plural condition, as masculine plural items still obtained a rather high score (1.66), as opposed to feminine plural items (1.17), whose score is lower than that of the nonbinary plural condition (1.52), as shown in Table 13. Performance with neutral singular and plural items is considered as 'ceiling', as all responses were scored as correct.

In order to establish whether the gender of the item and(/or) the number of the item are significant predictors of accuracy, we analyzed our data with a generalized mixed model with the R package *lme4* (Bates et al. 2024; R Core Team 2021). The fixed effects in the model were the grammatical gender of the item (item_gender) and the number of the item (task), while participants (id) and items (item) were treated as random effects. First, we also considered the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa) as an additional factor. The order of administration had neither a main effect ($p = 0.868$) nor a significant interaction with the other predictors (i.e., item gender and number), and was therefore excluded from the analysis. The final model was specified as follows:

Formula: score ~ item_gender * task + (1 | id) + (1 | item)

The grammatical gender of the item is a significant predictor of score (p-value < 0.001), whereas the number of the item is not, although very close to significance (p=0.053). A significant interaction between gender and number of the item is found (p-value < 0.05). The main effect of grammatical gender and the interaction between grammatical gender and number of the item are shown in Table 14.

Table 14 Main effect of grammatical gender and interaction with number, all conditions (*Analysis 1*)

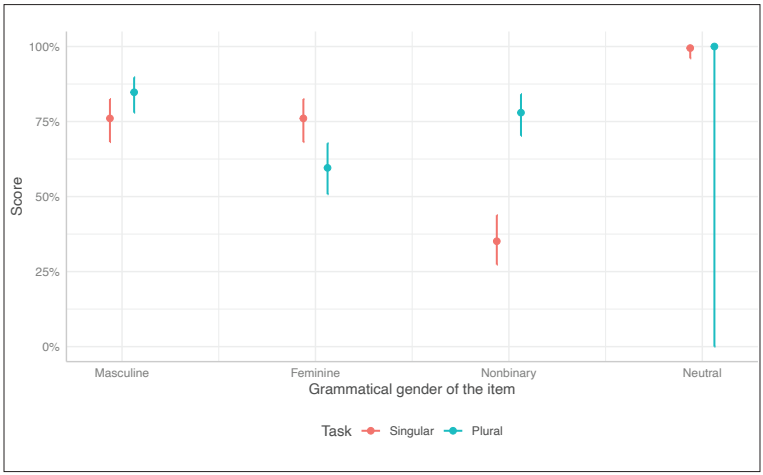
	score		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	3.18	2.13 – 4.74	**<0.001**
item_gender [femm]	1.00	0.59 – 1.69	1.000
item_gender [nonbin]	0.17	0.10 – 0.29	**<0.001**
item_gender [neutral]	59.81	8.14 – 439.26	**<0.001**
task [plur]	1.75	0.99 – 3.09	0.053
item_gender [femm] x task [plur]	0.26	0.12 – 0.57	**0.001**
item_gender [nonbin] x task [plur]	3.73	1.73 – 8.06	**0.001**
item_gender [neutral] x task [plur]	3368158.88	0.00 – 273518324157 00929081943012635 28284393942829686 83296984420191896 1603754065920.00	0.853

As can be seen in Table 14, the nonbinary condition significantly differs from the masculine one (p-value < 0.001), whereas the feminine condition does not significantly differ from the masculine condition

(p-value = 1.000). The significant difference also reported for the neutral condition is not taken into account, as whichever image gets assigned to neutral items is considered correct. As anticipated, no main effect of number was detected (p=0.053). Hence, excluding the influence exerted by gender, participants' performance did not vary according to changes in number alone.

The generalized mixed model revealed a significant interaction between number and gender conditions (p=0.001). As shown in Graph 2, the scores for feminine items are significantly lower in the plural than in the singular condition. Moreover, the scores for nonbinary items are significantly higher in the plural than in the singular condition (p=0.001). This raise in accuracy is to be traced back to the fact that the nonbinary plural condition was designed to include more correct answers, compared to its singular counterpart **[tab. 11]** – hence the exponential increase.

The effects of the interactions observed reflect the predicted probabilities of score displayed in Graph 3. For the feminine condition, predicted probabilities are lower in the plural than in the singular, indicating that while singular forms are strongly and systematically associated with female referents, plural forms show greater variability. For the nonbinary condition, the pattern is reversed: the singular shows greater variability, while the plural is more compact, resulting in a notable difference between the two figures. By contrast, the masculine condition shows virtually no difference across the number variable. A fuller understanding of these patterns will emerge from the qualitative analysis presented in Section 4.2.3.



Graph 3 Predicted probabilities of SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions

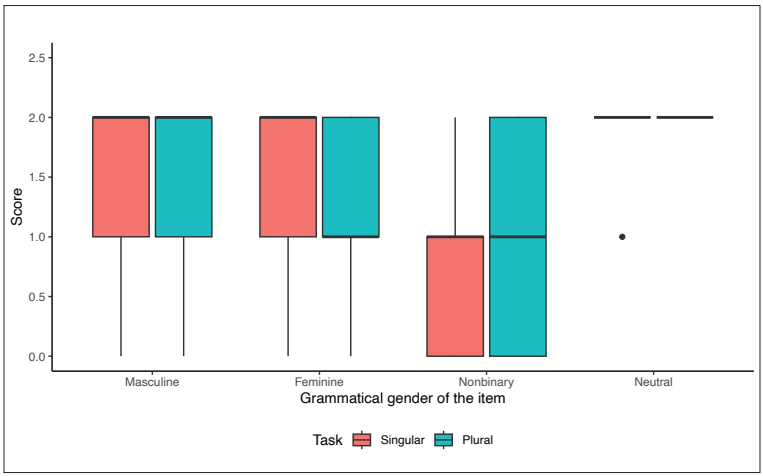
4.2.2.2 *Analysis 2*: Measuring Accuracy with a Nonbinary-Inclusive Representation of the Plural Suffix -*ə*

Analysis 2 is structured like *Analysis 1*. As a result of the exclusion of two groups (i.e., MMF, FFM), the scores in the nonbinary plural condition drop significantly. In Table 15, descriptive statistics for all conditions are shown. Data for the plural nonbinary condition are highlighted in bold.

Table 15 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values for the SPMT, all conditions (*Analysis 2*)

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
F.SG	1.4875	0.6363215	2	2	0
NB.SG	0.7250	0.7626569	1	2	0
neutral.SG	1.9875	0.1118034	2	2	1
M.PL	1.6625	0.5498849	2	2	0
F.PL	1.1750	0.7758213	1	2	0
NB.PL	**1.0125**	**0.7546271**	**1**	**2**	**0**
neutral.PL	2.0000	0.0000000	2	2	2

Graph 4 shows the distributions of the scores obtained for each condition:



Graph 4 Distributions of the SPMT scores, both tasks, all conditions (*Analysis 2*)

In comparing all the scores obtained by plural conditions, what emerges is that the nonbinary plural condition obtained the lowest score of all, as shown in Table 15 and Graph 4. As for the rest, the remarks passed on the other conditions – including the singular – reported in *Analysis 1* (cf. Section 4.2.2.1) remain unchanged, as a result of maintaining the same scoring procedure.

As can be seen in Table 16, another difference detectable in this second analysis concerns the influence exerted by the task factor, which turns out to be a significant predictor of score (p=0.048).[1] The main effect of number could be caused by the drop in score that occurs when a slightly more specific interpretation is chosen for the plural variant *-ə*, one that sees the inclusion of a nonbinary individual as a minimum requirement for group formation.

Table 16 Main effect of number and interaction with gender, all conditions (Analysis 2)

	score		
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	3.24	2.17 – 4.85	**<0.001**
item_gender [femm]	1.00	0.59 – 1.68	1.000
item_gender [nonbin]	0.17	0.10 – 0.28	**<0.001**
item_gender [neutral]	60.92	8.29 – 447.96	**<0.001**
task [plur]	1.76	1.00 – 3.09	**0.048**
item_gender [femm] x task [plur]	0.26	0.12 – 0.55	**<0.001**
item_gender [nonbin] x task [plur]	1.09	0.52 – 2.27	0.813
item_gender [neutral] x task [plur]	38150604.28	0.00 – 309061941249 18486397272241788 10986468619864584 53657959628708063 50309359616000.00	0.829

4.2.2.3 *Analysis 3*: Response Times with an *All*-Inclusive, Mixed-Gender Representation of the Plural Suffix *-ə*

Differences in response times depending on the gender and number of the item were detected, showing a rather gradual increase from the

1 As in *Analysis 1*, no main effect of the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., the singular-condition task preceding the plural-condition task and vice versa) was found (p=0.867). For this reason, it was excluded from the analysis.

gender-marked to the unmarked conditions. In Table 17, descriptive statistics for the response times are shown.

Table 17 Mean, SD, median, maximum and minimum values of the response times (ms) recorded for each condition

Conditions (gender and number)	Mean	SD	Median	Maximum	Minimum
M.SG	59787.75	33146.89	54436.0	186398	11661
F.SG	54093.90	26054.74	49311.5	171511	16104
NB.SG	70309.11	39688.70	61966.0	249645	13546
neutral.SG	62251.40	33119.29	52332.5	212141	16483
M.PL	79352.73	62051.33	67727.5	475896	17705
F.PL	76826.52	118528.77	58772.0	1069299	13192
NB.PL	76182.84	64141.88	60459.0	408148	17316
neutral.PL	89990.45	99654.89	66467.5	658778	20777

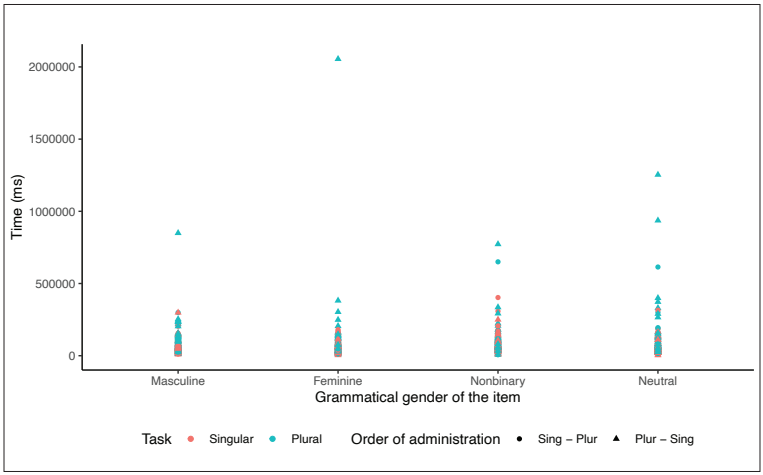
In the singular-condition task, participants' response times vary depending on the gender of the item. The feminine condition is the one in which participants exhibited the fastest mean response time (54093.90ms), followed by the masculine condition (59787.75ms), the neutral condition (62251.40ms), and the nonbinary condition (70309.11ms). In the plural-condition task, participants instead recorded the fastest mean response time in the nonbinary condition (76182.84ms), followed by the feminine condition (76826.52ms), the masculine condition (79352.73ms), and the neutral condition (89990.45ms). In confronting the two tasks, the fastest mean response time was recorded in the feminine condition. Unlike the feminine, the masculine condition presents two very different response times depending on whether it is singular or plural: in the singular, it recorded the second-fastest mean response time of all when introduced in the case of a singular-plural order of administration of the tasks; conversely, a rather slow mean response time was detected in the masculine plural condition. Remaining within the singular-condition task, as we move along the trajectory of gender to approach the lowest level of markedness, we observe a gradual increase in the mean response time reaching the neutral condition. This finding is also confirmed by the plural condition-task, in which the plural neutral condition displays the slowest mean response time. The most irregular pattern is nevertheless to be attributed to the nonbinary condition, registering the slowest mean response time in the singular-condition task, as opposed to the fastest mean response time in the plural-condition task.

In order to establish whether the gender of the item (i.e., item gender) and(/or) the number of the item (i.e., task) and(/or) the order of administration of the tasks (i.e., order) significantly impact on

participants' response times, we analyzed our data with a multiple linear regression run with the R package *stats* (R Core Team 2021). In the model, item gender, task and order of administration were treated as predictors, while participants' response times served as the dependent variable. The final model was specified as follows:

Formula: response_time ~ item_gender * task * order

Graph 5 shows the participants' response times for each condition, depending on the grammatical gender and number of the item, and the order of administration of the tasks.



Graph 5 Distributions of participants' response times across all conditions

A multiple linear regression revealed a significant general effect of the factors involved (i.e., gender and number of the item as well as the order of administration of the tasks) on response times. Moreover, a significant interaction between the order of administration of the tasks and number is found (p=0.0317), particularly concerning the plural-condition task when the latter is administered before the singular-condition task – an interaction responsible for increasing response times across all items. This is especially visible in the neutral condition **[graph 5]**, where gender is neutralized.

4.2.3 Qualitative Analysis of the Data

This section explores the internal distribution of the assigned genders found in each condition, so as to unveil the different percentages of

participants selecting pictures with contrasting-gender referents. The aim is to uncover whether, especially in the case of the most potentially ambiguous conditions, relatively close percentages emerge, for which no gender really stands out among the ones selected.

We begin with the masculine and nonbinary conditions, as both can activate potentially conflicting readings, either inclusive (*generic*) or exclusive (*specific*). We then turn to the neutral condition, which serves to reveal the gender most frequently assigned when no grammatical marker is available. Finally, the feminine condition is considered, so that all four experimental conditions are accounted for and the overall picture is complete.

In the masculine condition, a clear preference for a male referent to be matched with *il candidato* 'the.M.SG candidate.M.SG' strongly emerged, which is visible in Table 18. In the first masculine singular item, 80% of the participants selected a male referent, compared with 68.75% in the second item. The specific meaning of the masculine form in the singular is thus activated.

Table 18 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the masculine singular condition *il candidato* 'the.M.SG candidate.M.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Masculine singular 1	**80.00**	6.25	13.75
Masculine singular 2	**68.75**	12.50	18.75

Also for the plural, the specific meaning of the masculine form seems to be favored over the generic one, hence confirming that the alleged generic masculine displays a bias in favor of an interpretation that sees men as the exclusive referents, answering the research question in (III) (cf. Section 3.2). Looking at the percentages reported in Table 19, for both masculine plural items, the highest percentage of participants chose, as a visual representation of the referents *i candidati* 'the.M.PL candidates.M.PL', the depicted male-only group, showing that the specific interpretation of the masculine form is activated.[2] The male-only group (MMM) is followed by the one composed of two female members and one male member (i.e., the FFM group), which was chosen by 26.25% of the participants in the first item, and 18.75% of the participants in the second item. Note that the preference expressed for a female majority is far from random,

2 It should be noted that one participant's response could not be retrieved for the second item.

as will be illustrated later in the discussion section. In comparing the gender distribution of the two items, a general trend is that groups with at least one male member in the group were chosen more frequently as opposed to groups deprived of the male presence. The lowest percentages indeed occur at the female-only group and the nonbinary-only group.

Table 19 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the masculine plural condition *i candidati* 'the.M.PL candidates.M.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Masculine plural 1	**28.75**	5.00	10.00	12.50	26.25	17.50
Masculine plural 2	**38.75**	6.25	11.25	11.25	18.75	12.50

In the nonbinary singular condition, the preference for a female referent is visible in both items. The data reported in Table 20 indeed show that a female referent indicated as *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG' was selected by 52.5% of the participants in the first item, and by 42.5% in the second; as opposed to 38.75% and 32.5% of the participants choosing nonbinary referents instead in the first and second item, respectively. Overall, there was a fairly restrained selection of male referents.

Table 20 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the nonbinary singular condition *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Nonbinary singular 1	8.75	**52.50**	38.75
Nonbinary singular 2	23.75	**42.50**	32.50

As to the nonbinary plural condition, the nonbinary-only group was the most frequently selected by the participants **[tab. 21]**. Crucially, mixed-gender groups (i.e., MMF, FFM, MFNB) generally occurred at lower percentages. Notably, the gender-mixed group *par excellence* (i.e., MFNB) turned out to be the least selected in both nonbinary plural items, recording the lowest percentage of occurrence (i.e., 7.5%). However, it is worth highlighting that in the second nonbinary plural item, the FFM group reached the second-highest selection percentage (21.25%), suggesting a slightly greater variability in how plural nonbinary items were interpreted. Overall, these results point to the predominant use of the innovative suffix *-ə* to refer specifically to nonbinary groups.

Table 21 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the nonbinary plural condition *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Nonbinary plural 1	8.75	18.75	**42.50**	11.25	11.25	7.50
Nonbinary plural 2	8.75	11.25	**43.75**	7.50	21.25	7.50

In the absence of grammatical gender cues, it becomes difficult to predict which gender is to be picked by participants. Neutral items were included in the study precisely to investigate which gender is favored in a condition that is deprived of any gender markers. Looking at the data reported in Table 22, it appears that the highest percentage of the participants selected a nonbinary referent for the first neutral item (40%) and a male referent for the second neutral item (50%). However, the frequency of occurrence of the male and nonbinary gender in the first neutral item nearly coincides (i.e., 40% *vs* 38.75%). Although nonbinary and female referents found a rather fair representation within the neutral condition, it is safe to conclude that in the absence of any possible indicators of grammatical gender, participants tended to resort to the default value, i.e., male.

Table 22 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the neutral singular condition *l'aspirante tutor* 'the aspiring mentor'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Neutral singular 1	38.75	20.00	**40.00**
Neutral singular 2	**50.00**	32.50	17.50

The process of gender assignment through selection of the depicted referent seems to follow two different trajectories with neutral plural items as well. Pure maleness prevails in the first neutral item, selected by 25% of the participants, whereas a mixed-gender group with a majority of female members (i.e., the FFM group) was picked by 31.25% of the participants in the second neutral item, as reported in Table 23. The responses obtained in the first neutral item thus seem to confirm the tendency to interpret as male referents candidates described without mentioning any gender information. Such an interpretation mirrors the one triggered by the neutral singular condition. In general, images depicting at least one male referent are selected much more frequently than those without any male individual. For instance, in the singular condition, female referents are chosen only 20% or 32.5% of the time, depending on

the neutral item, while male referents clearly dominate. Similarly, when combining gender-homogeneous and nonbinary-only groups (FFF + NBNBNB), responses in the second neutral plural item just exceed the expected ~16.6% for an unbiased distribution, reaching around 20%. Although slightly above chance, this imbalance suggests a consistent interpretive bias rather than random variation, even without formal statistical testing. Overall, unmarked forms tend to be associated with male or male-inclusive groups in both neutral singular and plural conditions.

Table 23 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the neutral plural condition *i membri del gruppo di ricerca* 'members of the research team'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Neutral plural 1	**25.00**	18.75	13.75	7.50	16.25	18.75
Neutral plural 2	11.25	7.50	12.50	25.00	**31.25**	12.50

In the feminine condition, a robust association with female referents is evident, as shown in Table 24. In the singular items, 66.25% and 82.5% of the participants selected a female referent, with nonbinary referents as a secondary choice and male referents rarely selected (5% and 0%).[3]

Table 24 Percentages of participants selecting each of the three genders (male, female, nonbinary) in the feminine singular condition *la candidata* 'the.F.SG candidate.F.SG'

Condition	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)
Feminine singular 1	5.00	**66.25**	27.50
Feminine singular 2	0.00	**82.50**	17.50

Similarly, in the plural items, the data reported in Table 25 reveal a preference for groups composed solely of female members (i.e., the FFF group), chosen by 55% and 62.5% of the participants and followed by nonbinary-only groups (30% and 27.5%). Male-only and mixed-gender groups were rarely selected. Overall, the feminine form most often elicits a mapping onto female referents, though slightly weaker when compared with the singular. At the same time, a noteworthy secondary association with nonbinary referents emerges, indicating

3 It should be noted that one participant's response could not be retrieved for the first item.

that while the plural feminine form is predominantly interpreted as referring to exclusively female groups, it is not perceived as exclusively female by all the participants, with male referents almost entirely disregarded.

Table 25 Frequency (%) of occurrence of each of the six groups distinguished by their gender composition in the feminine plural condition *le candidate* 'the.F.PL candidates.F.PL'

Condition	MMM (%)	FFF (%)	NBNBNB (%)	MMF (%)	FFM (%)	MFNB (%)
Feminine plural 1	1.25	**55.00**	30.00	3.75	5.00	5.00
Feminine plural 2	1.25	**62.50**	27.50	2.50	3.75	2.50

4.3 Results of the Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian (SILUI)

For every item composing the first section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5), only the response selected by the majority of participants – coinciding with their expressed assent/dissent – will be commented on. Given the presence of two adjoining indicators (e.g., 'strongly agree', 'agree' as well as 'strongly disagree', 'disagree') in the 5-point Likert scale used to provide the answers, the overall percentage indicating assent was obtained by adding up the percentage of participants who claimed to 'agree' with the statement reported in the item together with the percentage of those who 'strongly agreed' with it. The same procedure was adopted to establish dissent.[4] All percentages are available in Table 26, which provides a precise division of the sample based on the level of agreement with the item expressed.

4 This serves as a methodological note to go through the analysis in that choosing to look at the aggregated data instead of the disaggregated data can sometimes lead to opposite conclusions (e.g., Items 4 and 10).

Table 26 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated

Item	Corresponding statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Item 1	Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.	17.50	13.75	26.25	30.00	12.50
Item 2	We should not change the way the Italian language has traditionally been written and spoken.	22.50	28.75	17.50	21.25	10.00
Item 3	Inclusive language is a trivial matter.	45.00	31.25	11.25	6.25	6.25
Item 4	The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.	7.50	28.75	21.25	27.50	15.00
Item 5	When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with *ə*: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.	12.50	11.25	13.75	32.50	30.00
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	20.00	31.25	20.00	23.75	5.00
Item 7	The elimination of the sexist use of the Italian language is an important goal.	6.25	15.00	16.25	27.50	35.00
Item 8	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid the sexist use of language.	8.75	16.25	15.00	23.75	36.25
Item 9	The sexist use of the Italian language is related to sexist treatment of people in the Italian society.	21.25	5.00	5.00	37.50	31.25
Item 10	If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with *ə*: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.	16.25	26.25	15.00	22.50	20.00

Item	Corresponding statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	25.00	36.25	18.75	17.50	2.50
Item 12	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language.	5.00	10.00	18.75	27.50	38.75
Item 13	It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".	32.50	21.25	23.75	12.50	10.00

A total of 42.5% of the participants agreed with Item 1. The choice of having the common-gender term preceded by a masculine determiner responsible for a gender disambiguation (*il signor presidente* 'Mr President') is seen as a sexist behavior.

A slight majority of the participants (51.25%) disagreed with Item 2, thus advocating for a change at the level of language, irrespective of how rooted some of the practices might be.

A great majority of the participants (76.25%) disagreed with considering inclusive language a trivial matter as stated in Item 3. This item thus gives us an approximate size of the sample that recognizes full dignity to the topic at hand.

According to the responses, 42.5% of the participants agreed with Item 4 in accepting the use of the masculine plural to refer to mixed-gender groups, for the sake of an ease and instantaneousness that would guarantee a rather effective communication, hence justifying its use. Although acknowledging that it is not inclusive *per se*, the majority of participants are nevertheless in favor of such an employment.

More than half of the participants (62.5%) agreed that it is only fair to refer to a person who does not identify with the binary distinction of gender with *-ə* (e.g., *studentə*), as posited in Item 5. Therefore, the majority of participants seem to welcome the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* serving as the singular exclusive representation of the nonbinary population.

A slight majority of participants (51.25%) disagreed with Item 6, once again promoting change, regardless of cultural conservatism.

In line with the content of Item 3, Item 7 stresses the importance of achieving the elimination of the sexist use of Italian by framing it as an important goal, according to 62.5% of the participants.

By approving the proposal put forward by Item 8, 60% of the participants agreed with the necessity that the phenomenon of the sexist use of language must be controlled for in drafting specific editorial guidelines.

In agreeing with Item 9, 68.75% of the participants are also aware of a strong interdependence existing between the way people are treated in Italian society and the sexist use of the Italian language.

Based on the responses collected for Item 10, the inclusive plural ending *-ə* was neither rejected nor approved by our sample of participants. As a matter of fact, in adding up the percentages of participants who expressed their dissent (i.e., 'strongly disagree', 'disagree') and comparing it with the sum of the percentages of participants expressing their assent (i.e., 'strongly agree', 'agree'), we reach the same exact percentage, amounting to 42.5%. Therefore, this time it is not possible to determine a disparity.

According to 61.25% of the participants disagreeing with Item 11, the idea that teachers demanding students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly exercising some sort of political power over students is simply wrong. Hence, the majority of participants believe that in the educational context, banning sexism in language is not the same as imposing a political view.

By agreeing with Item 12, 66.25% of the participants once again confirmed the need to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language and highlighted the urgency of action to implement change, no matter the difficulties.

To conclude, 53.75% of the participants disagreed with Item 13 rejecting the neutral qualifiers 'parent 1' and 'parent 2' as potential replacements for the labels 'mother' and 'father'. The fact that so many agree with this rather innovative – to some even controversial – proposal is quite impressive. Those in favor of replacing the traditional, long-established roles with these novel, neutral qualifiers are indeed the clear majority.

The second section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5) draws from four "designation errors" (APA 1983) that are brought to the attention of participants who are instructed to pass their judgments by expressing the degree of sexism found in each error. Percentages are listed in Table 27.

Table 27 Percentages of participants assessing sexism in each statement, divided by the level of sexism found (not at all sexist, not sexist, undecided, sexist, clearly sexist)

Item	Corresponding full statement	Not at all sexist (%)	Not sexist (%)	Undecided (%)	Sexist (%)	Clearly sexist (%)
Item 14	Marta è una donna transgender. È nat**o** nel 1986. 'Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.'	6.25	12.50	13.75	21.25	46.25
Item 15	Lucia non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere. Lucia è cresciut**a** a Modena. 'Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.'	21.25	12.50	10.00	28.75	27.50
Item 16	Serena ha superato con successo l'abilitazione all'avvocatura. Adesso Serena è un avvocat**o**. 'Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.'	26.25	17.50	12.50	30.00	13.75
Item 17	**Le** maestr**e** delle scuole elementari tendono a dare tanto spazio alle attività ludiche. The.F.PL elementary school 'teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.'	30.00	12.50	18.75	28.75	10.00

As with the previous section, the aggregated data are taken into account.

A majority of the participants (67.5%) were able to identify the incorrect gender selection in Item 14 by declaring that this instance is sexist. Item 15 involved the assignment of a binary gender marker – apparently motivated by the presence of a feminine given name (i.e., *Lucia*) – to a person who had explicitly stated that they do not identify with the binary distinction of gender; this item was judged sexist by 56.25% of the participants. The totality of participants who considered Item 16 'sexist' equals the totality of those who claimed that it is 'not sexist' (43.75%). No clear preference emerges from the sample's responses. The percentage of participants assessing Item 17 as 'not sexist' amounts to 42.5%. It is safe to assume that, because female primary school teachers outnumber male teachers in Italy, this is understood by participants as a harmless generalization that does not suggest the overshadowing of a male minority. Our exposure

to "the feminine generic" (Pires 2020, 119) is rather rare, so much so that we do not even notice it.

The third section of the SILUI (cf. Section 3.5) measures the participants' intention to accommodate three different uses of the innovative suffix *-ə*. A clear-cut disparity can be traced in all three items, as can be grasped by the high percentages reported in Table 28.

Table 28 Percentages of participants expressing their willingness/unwillingness to welcome the usage described in each statement, divided by the level of willingness indicated

Item	Corresponding full statement	Very unwilling (%)	Unwilling (%)	Undecided (%)	Willing (%)	Very willing (%)
Item 18	How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	11.25	12.50	11.25	26.25	38.75
Item 19	How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	10.00	15.00	12.50	18.75	43.75
Item 20	How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	10.00	7.50	13.75	25.00	43.75

As above, the highest percentage emerging from the aggregated data is looked at.

With Item 18, 65% of the participants claimed to be willing to adopt the *-ə* suffix to represent an exclusive-nonbinary plurality in a sequence that makes sure to overtly mention all three gender categories, as in the case of the opening of an email with *cari studenti, care studentesse e carə studentə* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL, dear.F.PL students.F.PL and dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.

Once having established that the plural exclusive nonbinary ending seems to have been approved, the predisposition to eventually introduce a single, short form to represent a male, female and nonbinary composition was subsequently tested with Item 19. A total of 62.5% of the participants stated that they are willing to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender. This proves that a plural inclusive usage of the *-ə* suffix is expected to be equally welcomed.

Along the same lines, with Item 20, 68.75% of the participants expressed their willingness to use the singular exclusive nonbinary ending to refer to a person who does not identity with the binary distinction of gender by replacing the term *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' with *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG'.

Table 29 summarizes the modal values obtained across items, indicating the most frequently selected response options and thus offering insight into participants' prevailing attitudes toward inclusive language, according to the scoring system adopted from Parks and Roberton (2000).[5] For clarity, the reverse-scored items are listed again here: 2 (3.1), 3 (3.2), 4 (3.10), 6 (3.3), 11 (3.7), and 13 (3.13). These are in bold in the table.

Table 29 Summary of modal responses for each item of the SILUI questionnaire, along with the corresponding level of agreement, perceived sexism, or willingness to adopt inclusive language

Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 1	Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.	Agreement	4
Item 2	We should not change the way the Italian language has traditionally been written and spoken.	Disagreement	2
Item 3	Inclusive language is a trivial matter.	Disagreement	2
Item 4	The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.	Agreement	4
Item 5	When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with *ə*: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.	Agreement	4

5 As anticipated in Section 3.5, all items "were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale. High scores (4-5) indicated a positive attitude toward inclusive language; low scores (1-2) indicated a negative attitude toward inclusive language. A score of 3 indicated neutrality or uncertainty" (Parks, Roberton 2000, 423).

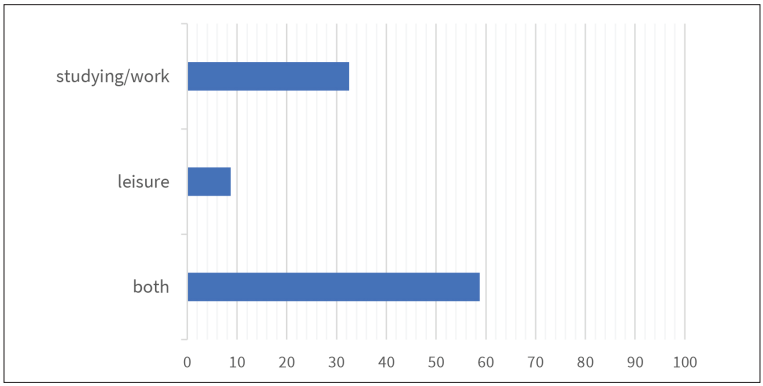
Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Disagreement	2
Item 7	The elimination of the sexist use of the Italian language is an important goal.	Strong agreement	5
Item 8	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid the sexist use of language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 9	The sexist use of the Italian language is related to sexist treatment of people in the Italian society.	Agreement	4
Item 10	If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with *ə*: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.	Agreement/ Disagreement	4/2
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	Disagreement	2
Item 12	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 13	It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".	Strong disagreement	1
Item 14	Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.	Clear sexism	5
Item 15	Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.	Sexism	4
Item 16	Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.	Sexism/No sexism	4/2
Item 17	The.F.PL elementary school teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.	No sexism at all	1
Item 18	How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear. NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 19	How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 20	How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5

Overall, the predominance of high scores (4-5), together with the six items that are reverse-scored for which very low scores are indeed reported, makes us conclude that we are dealing with a sample of participants who have a positive attitude toward inclusive language. The only two responses that actually countertrend the positive attitude are the ones recorded at Item 4 and Item 17.[6] The former seems to appeal to a 'practical' reason, that is, to invoke the immediacy, and the convenience of using the masculine plural to ensure an effective performance, while acknowledging its inner limits (cf. Section 1.5). The latter could be explained by our reduced exposure to the phenomenon of the generic feminine, as previously posited. We are so not used to the generic feminine that we do not even notice it; and it seems so harmless that we cannot trace it back to a discriminatory use. Going in the opposite direction, Item 13 is a virtuous example of the unexpected level of progress our sample strives for. The fact that our sample would go along with such a strong intervention says a lot about the readiness of a community of speakers prepared to embrace a linguistic change of this magnitude. In Items 10 and 16 a tie is established, which makes it impossible to determine what position prevails.

4.4 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

The first part of the questionnaire – as anticipated in Section 3.6 – explores reading habits by opening precisely with the question regarding the reasons for reading. The participants' response rates for Item 1 are visually displayed in Graph 6. It was found that 32.5% of the participants only read for studying and working purposes, whereas only 8.75% of the participants declared to read for leisure, in their free time. Both options were selected by 58.75% of the participants.

6 It should be noted that the responses obtained for Item 4 lead to a different conclusion depending on whether one only considers the 'agree' answer or also the 'strongly agree' answer (i.e., disaggregated *vs* aggregated data) **[tab. 26]**.



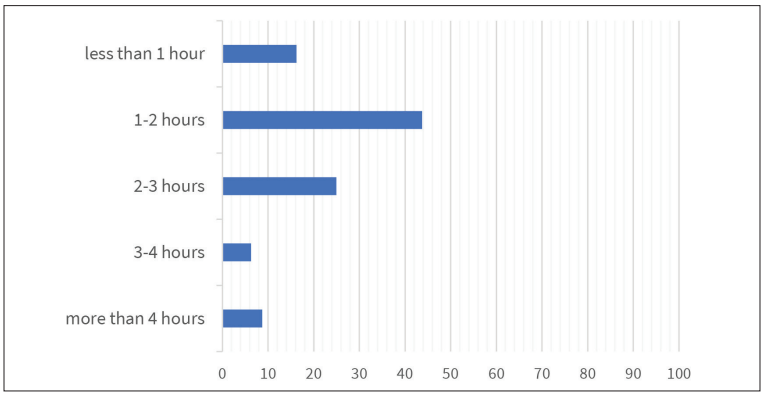
Graph 6 *Why do you read?* Distribution of participants according to their reasons for reading (response rates)

Readers' familiarity with different text genres was measured by means of reading frequency in Item 2, with all percentages listed in Table 30. Looking at the aggregated data, it emerges that 86.25% of the participants often read online information. Fiction is read often by 52.5% of the participants, as opposed to nonfiction, which is never read by 31.25% of the participants or only rarely by 20% of the participants. School and university textbooks are read often by 50% of the participants. When it comes to periodical press, our sample of participants is fairly distributed: 30% claimed to read periodical press only sometimes, another 30% declared to read it often, 26.25% only rarely, with 13.75% never reading periodical press. With technical documentation, another tie is established: both participants who read it often as well as those who only rarely read it amount to 31.25%. 20% of the participants never read it and 17.5% of the participants read it sometimes. A similar pattern is found with scientific literature: 18.75% of the participants read it sometimes, 40% read it often, 41.25% read it either rarely or not at all. Therefore, it can be ruled out that familiarity with the format identified for the sentence-picture matching task (i.e., technical documentation) facilitated the processing of the text by partly obscuring the morphological innovation introduced. It is also specified that among the additional textual types reported by a few participants are collections of poems – with the specification of 'often' as an indication of its reading frequency –, comics (very often), travel guides and books for work.

Table 30 Percentages of participants stating their reading frequency of different text genres, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

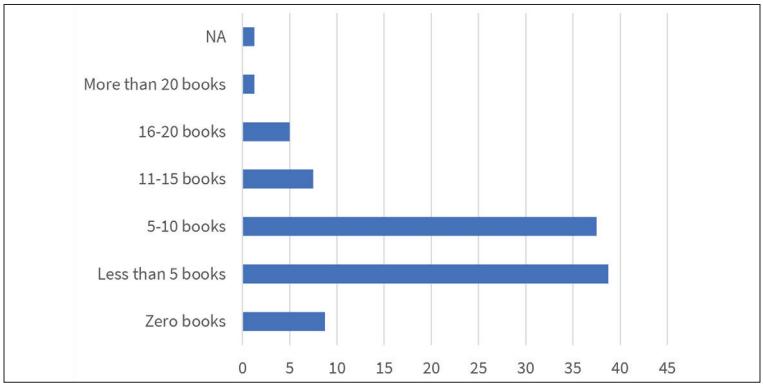
Text genre	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
School/university textbooks	17.50	15.00	17.50	16.25	33.75
Scientific literature	16.25	25.00	18.75	18.75	21.25
Technical documentation	20.00	31.25	17.50	12.50	18.75
Fiction	17.50	13.75	16.25	35.00	17.50
Nonfiction	31.25	20.00	18.75	18.75	11.25
Periodical press	13.75	26.25	30.00	22.50	7.50
Online information	0.00	5.00	8.75	31.25	55.00

The approximate number of hours spent reading on average each day (including reading for study, work and pleasure) is the information obtained with Item 3. As Graph 7 shows, 43.75% of the participants read 1-2 hours per day, followed by 25% of the participants reading from 2-3 hours per day. Only 6.25% of the participants read 3-4 hours per day. Moving to the two poles, 16.25% of the participants stated they read less than one hour per day, whereas 8.75% of the participants reported reading more than 4 hours. As the level of expertise – determined by a range of factors including the time spent reading – might modulate, to some extent, the processing of linguistic innovations by enabling participants to put in place diversified strategies to handle the new form, the data collected here do not suggest a surprisingly high number of hours spent reading.



Graph 7 *How much time do you spend reading each day?* Proportions of the percentages of participants based on the approximate number of hours devoted to reading each day (response rates)

The size of participants' reading pile is also an indication of their level of expertise. Responses collected with Item 4 are visually illustrated in Graph 8. Only 8.75% of the participants reported that they did not read any books for leisure in their spare time, 38.75% of the participants read less than five books, as opposed to 37.5% who read up to ten books. As the number of books goes up, percentages go down: 7.5% of the participants read 11 to 15 books, with only 5% indicating 20 as the maximum number. In only one case, the participant claimed to have read around 60 books. Shown as NA are responses for which it was not possible to infer, even approximately, the number of books read.



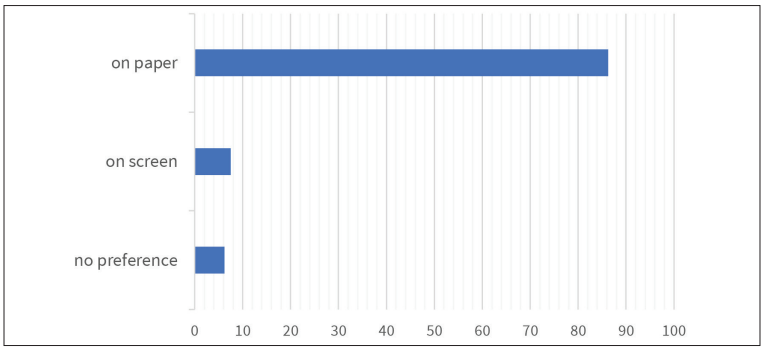
Graph 8 *How many books have you read this year (in your spare time)?* Distribution of participants according to the number of books read in the current year (response rates)

Items 5 and 6 are closely interrelated, in that they both explore the print *vs* digital opposition by looking at the frequency of use of different media **[tab. 31]** as well as participants' preferred medium **[graph 9]**. The smartphone turned out to be the most widely used by 76.25% of the participants. Print media were also rated rather highly: 72.5% of the participants reported reading from print media often. A total of 62.5% of the participants affirmed to often use their computer to read. Conversely, the great majority of participants never (or only rarely) opts for using a tablet or an e-reader to read from. In fact, 63.75% of the participants declared that they never read from a tablet; comparably, 77.5% of the participants admitted that they never read from an e-reader.

Table 31 Percentages of participants stating their frequency of use of different media, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

Medium	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
Print media	1.25	11.25	15.00	13.75	58.75
Smartphone	3.75	11.25	8.75	27.50	48.75
Computer	11.25	12.5	13.75	28.75	33.75
Tablet	63.75	7.50	16.25	3.75	8.75
E-reader	77.50	7.50	5.00	6.25	3.75

As displayed in Graph 9, with reference to Item 6, when faced with the choice between reading on paper or on screen, 86.25% of the participants expressed their preference for reading on paper. Only 7.5% of the participants would rather read on screen, while 6.25% of the participants reported no preference whatsoever. For the purposes of this study, these data might indirectly suggest that only the 7.5% of the participants who preferred onscreen reading could have experienced a positive effect on their performance in the sentence-picture matching task carried out online, whereas no such effect is expected for the majority who preferred reading on paper.



Graph 9 *Would you rather read on paper or on screen?* Distribution of participants according to their preference for the medium to read from (response rates)

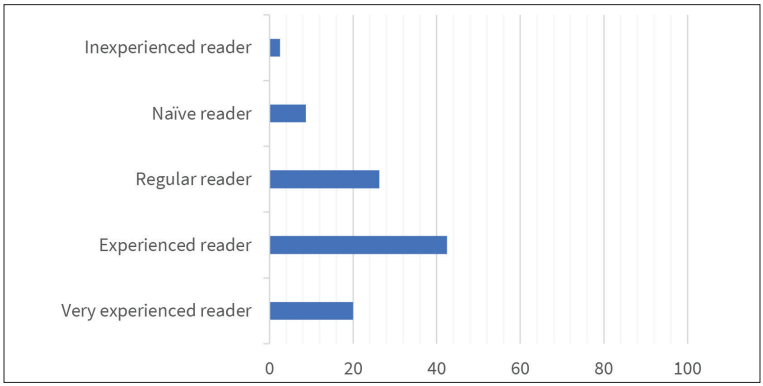
The beneficial power of reading seems to be fully recognized by our experimental sample in its entirety. The four statements that make up Item 7 indeed allowed us to reconstruct how reading is viewed in terms of enjoyability, purpose and effort by referring to Table 32. Almost the entirety of our sample (98.75%) agreed with the statement on the importance of reading. Only one participant did not recognize its importance. Reading is considered an enjoyable activity by 80% of the participants, with only two participants stating the opposite, and 17.5% of the participants not taking a position. In line with these

results, 83.75% of the participants disagreed with reading being a boring activity. As to the effort to be put in reading, opinions here are more diversified: 31.25% of the participants declared being neutral on this matter, 27.5% of the participants disagreed with the statement according to which reading is hard, whereas 25% of the participants recognized that the activity of reading is indeed hard. Looking at the aggregated data, a sharp split is observed: 36.25% of the participants overall found themselves in disagreement with this statement, as opposed to 32.5% of the participants being in agreement.

Table 32 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
Reading is an enjoyable activity	1.25	1.25	17.5	21.25	58.75
Reading is a boring activity	50.00	33.75	12.50	2.50	1.25
Reading is important	1.25	0.00	0.00	8.75	90.00
Reading is hard	8.75	27.50	31.25	25.00	7.50

Through the brief self-assessment procedure obtained with Item 8, participants were profiled according to their competence. Graph 10 shows that our sample is divided as follows: 42.5% of the participants claimed to be experienced readers and only 2.5% of the participants consider themselves inexperienced readers. Turning now to the intermediate levels, 8.75% of the participants believe they are naïve readers; 26.25% of the participants are regular readers; and 20% of the participants are confident they are very experienced readers.



Graph 10 *What kind of reader do you consider yourself to be?* Proportions of the percentages of participants based on their self-assessment as experienced/inexperienced readers (response rates)

Item 9 opens the section of the questionnaire specifically devoted to measuring participants' exposure to the inclusive use of the Italian language. A major distinction was first drawn between participants who had heard of inclusive language prior to the experiment – who turned out to be the vast majority of participants (88.75%) – and those who had never heard of inclusive language before (11.25%). Once established that almost 90% of the participants were already familiar with the concept of inclusive language, an attempt was made to dig deeper into the degree of familiarity by looking at the exposure to the most common strategies at play by means of Item 10. Starting with the long-standing, less invasive ones that do not involve the inclusion of external linguistic materials, the strategy of coordinating feminine and masculine terms is by far the most frequently used according to 65% of the participants, who claimed to have come across this technique often in their previous readings. Only 7.5% of the participants reported that they had never encountered coordination of feminine and masculine terms. Collective nouns are also quite popular according to participants' responses. The highest percentages are indeed found among participants who said they had seen this strategy in use at least 'sometimes' (73.75%). 15% of the participants did not detect any collective nouns in their previous readings.

As to the more recent strategies entailing the "adoption or resemanticization of individual characters" (Pires 2020, 115) – a practice investing both punctuation marks and orthographic markers – the employment of *-ə* as the word ending (e.g., *Salve a tuttə* 'hello everyonə') turned out to be the most frequently recognized by the participants, in line with predictions, hence confirming the reasons behind the choice to focus our research on this particular

strategy. Similar percentages were found for the asterisk (*) occupying the position of the suffix, while the other strategies were much less common. All percentages are reported in Table 33.

Table 33 Percentages of participants stating the frequency with which they had previously encountered the strategies of inclusive language available for Italian that are reported in the table, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often)

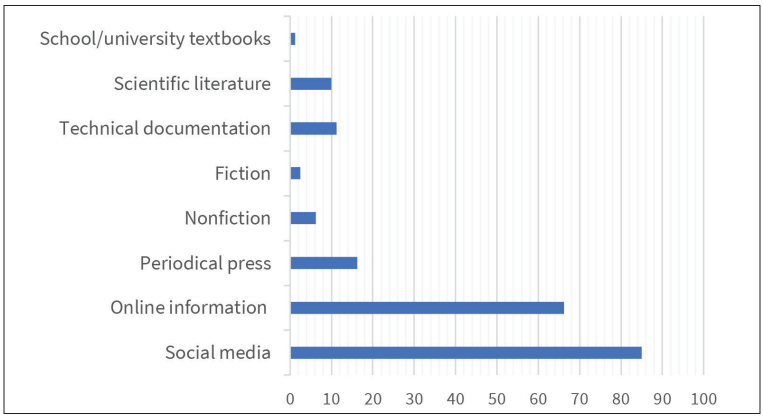
Strategy of inclusive language	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)
Coordination of feminine and masculine terms	7.50	8.75	18.75	25.00	40.00
Collective nouns	15.00	11.25	25.00	28.75	20.00
"***" as the word ending	17.50	10.00	28.75	21.25	22.50
"**@**" as the word ending	52.50	15.00	13.75	11.25	7.50
"_" as the word ending	82.50	11.25	6.25	0.00	0.00
"***x***" as the word ending	72.50	11.25	10.00	3.75	2.50
"***u***" as the word ending	75.00	7.50	8.75	6.25	2.50
"**ə**" as the word ending	17.50	11.25	25.00	22.50	23.75

The responses collected with Item 11 were necessary to supplement the list provided in the previous question. Participants were indeed instructed to provide any other strategies attributable to inclusive language, potentially drawing on their multilingual competence. Their responses concerned different languages. In sticking with Italian first, the orthographic marker 'æ' used as a suffix was pointed out (cf. Section 2.2.2), as well as *3* (e.g., *ciao a tutt3* 'hello everybod3'). The slash separating the masculine and feminine determiners to provide both alternatives was also reported (e.g., *il/la…* 'the.M.SG/the.F.SG') (cf. Section 2.2.1), along with suggesting the omission of whichever word containing gender markers. According to one participant, borrowings from English deprived of gender markers as well as opting for the use of the feminine as the default value (cf. Section 2.2.2) are two common strategies used within the Lgbtqia+ community. It is generally considered to be a good practice to always ask the person you are addressing what are the correct pronouns to use. Other suggestions came from German: the so-called *BinnenI* as in *StudentInnen* consisting in capitalizing the 'i' of the *-innen* suffix indicating the feminine of nouns precisely to signal that both genders are included; the use of gerunds (e.g., *Studierenden*) to express category (cf. Section 2.3). The employment of the midpoint in French is also reported, as in *épuisé·e* (cf. Section 2.3).

In shifting the focus on the innovative suffix *-ə*, the purpose of Item 12 was to identify the text genre that most frequently hosts this symbol. More than one option could be selected. As shown in Graph

11, 85% of the participants located the use of *-ə* as a word ending in social media, in the form of captions or *ad hoc* created content. In line with this result, 66.25% of the participants selected online information covering various topics such as current affairs, cooking, sports, culture, travel, fashion and so on, not necessarily retrieved via social media. These percentages lead to think that digital news are where these linguistic transformations are catching on.

Among the lower percentages we find scientific literature (10%), fiction (2.5%) and nonfiction (6.25%). Only one participant reported that they had encountered the *-ə* suffix in textbooks (1.25%). Technical documentation, which is the text genre deployed in the experimental procedure, was selected by a higher percentage of participants (11.25%), yet corresponding to nine participants only.



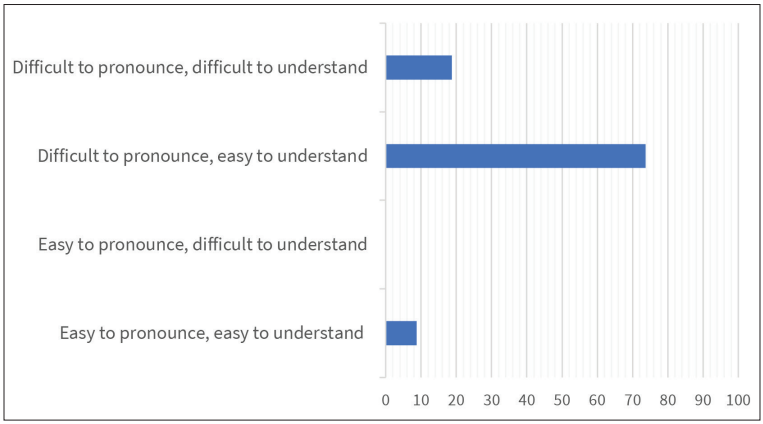
Graph 11 Percentages of participants selecting the text genre in which they had previously encountered the 'ə' symbol (response rates)

The last two questions address the participants' overall perception of the innovative suffix *-ə* by testing whether the *-ə* ending is perceived as an obstacle to the reading of the word, and by investigating the performativity and meaning related to it. When asked to determine the level of interference of the 'ə' symbol in the process of reading on a 5-point Likert scale, the majority of participants expressed their uncertainty (25%), as shown in Table 34. The response rates are relatively close, meaning that the sample is quite divided on the issue. The general trend is however that most participants lean toward not considering it an obstacle to reading.

Table 34 Distribution of participants based on their perception of the 'ə' symbol

Not an obstacle	1	22.50%
	2	18.75%
	3	25.00%
	4	21.25%
Definitely an obstacle	5	12.50%

As to its phonetic production and interpretation, the situation changes drastically: a rather larger disproportion emerges from Graph 12. Almost all participants (about 91%) agreed that this new suffix is difficult to pronounce. Despite this difficulty, a very high percentage of participants (72.5%) established that it is easy to understand what the *-ə* suffix stands for. 18.75% of the participants found it difficult not only to pronounce but also to understand what *-ə* refers to.[7]



Graph 12 Proportions of the percentages of participants according to their evaluation of the 'ə' symbol (response rates)

Although these judgments are the result of a mediated, conscious evaluation, and therefore do not constitute a direct and spontaneous measurement, they are valuable indications suggesting how the participants feel about embracing this linguistic innovation, by shedding light on the actual limitations. To date, based on the responses from the sample tested, the greatest difficulty seems to

7 Note that one participant was excluded from the analysis for this specific question, as they selected two mutually contradictory options – reporting both *difficult to pronounce, easy to understand* and *easy to pronounce, easy to understand*.

be found at the level of pronunciation. Understanding its meaning, on the other hand, appears to be easily accessible.

4.5 Reading Experience and Response Times: A Correlational Analysis

To explore the relationship between reading experience and response times (RTs), we employed the non-parametric Kendall's Tau test, suited for small sample sizes. As a more objective measure of reading experience and skills, we used the number of books read in a year, instead of the participants' self-assessed reading ability scores.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between the two variables (tau = -0.05651255, $p = 0.04$). Specifically, the data suggest that as the number of books read annually increases, response times tend to decrease slightly. This finding supports the underlying assumption that frequent readers, especially those accustomed to digital reading, tend to develop more efficient reading processes, which may in turn result in faster response times during reading tasks.

The results are consistent with the idea that regular reading practice can positively affect the speed at which textual information is processed, although the observed effect remains relatively modest.

5 Investigating Gender Interpretation Without Images: Evidence from a Follow-Up Study

Index 5.1 Introduction. – 5.2 Participants. – 5.3 Results of the Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task. – 5.4 Results of the SILUI. – 5.5 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits.

5.1 Introduction

This follow-up study employed a *Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task* (TCET), designed to assess participants' interpretation of a gendered neomorpheme without relying on images. The representative images used in the main study to convey gender identity, previously validated by a separate sample as appropriate depictions of male, female, and nonbinary identities, were replaced with simple textual labels: *maschile* 'male', *femminile* 'female', *non-binario* 'nonbinary', and *altro* 'other'. The label *altro* was included to account for cases in which the neomorpheme in the stimuli could plausibly refer to individuals who do not identify within the binary gender system, such as agender or genderfluid individuals, and may not be adequately captured by the term *nonbinary* alone. This design choice was driven by the key considerations in (1)-(3):

1. to avoid reinforcing or invoking stereotypical visual representations, particularly for the nonbinary category,

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/005

which presents a complex and culturally variable challenge, as any visual depiction risks relying on a shared but problematic imaginary;
2. to reduce visual processing load by replacing six face images with four single-word labels, thereby significantly lowering cognitive demands;
3. to mitigate the sense of visual overload caused by the presence of many multimedia elements on the screen.

The task involved reading a short descriptive stimulus about a candidate and responding to a set of evaluation questions. Participants were asked to assess the candidate's academic background, prior experience, and suitability for the role using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'poor', 5 = 'excellent'). A final multiple-choice question required participants to indicate the candidate's perceived gender (labels: *maschile* 'male', *femminile* 'female', *non-binario* 'nonbinary', *altro* 'other'). The order of the labels was fixed across items. The descriptive stimuli are the same used in the singular condition of the main experiment (cf. Section 3.4.2.1).

The first major difference from the main study is the removal of the plural condition: this follow-up focuses on the singular dimension, aiming to test the evaluation of one candidate at a time and, consequently, the singular interpretation of the neomorpheme used in the stimuli.

To implement the intended reduction in visual complexity, the task was also procedurally modified. The two key steps in the task – the reading of the prompt and the response to evaluation questions – were split across two sequential screens: the first displayed the text stimulus alone, while the second presented the evaluation questions. This adjustment allowed for a more organized and cognitively manageable flow of information, reducing participants' processing load.

In addition to the removal of candidate images (already implemented as a simplification), this two-screen structure introduced an additional procedural change: response times were recorded only during the second screen, that is, during the evaluation phase. As a result, it was not possible to replicate the response time analysis (cf. Section 4.2.2.3) or the correlational analysis conducted in the main experiment (cf. Section 4.5).

5.2 Participants

40 native Italian-speaking participants (24 F, 16 M, age range 18–67 years, mean age 28.05 years, SD = 12.65) took part in the experiment. As in the main experiment, age was not a variable of

interest and was therefore not included as a covariate in the analyses. Participants varied in educational background, with most holding either a high school diploma or a university degree. Specifically, the sample included one participant with a PhD, 30% of the participants (n=12) with a Master's degree (*Laurea Magistrale*), and 25% (n=10) with a Bachelor's degree (*Laurea Triennale*). 37.5% of the participants (n=15) had completed a high school diploma (*Diploma di scuola superiore*), while 5% of the participants (n=2) had only completed lower secondary education (*Diploma di scuola media*).

All participants reported Italian as their native language, though most of them also indicated proficiency in at least one foreign language, most commonly English. Several participants declared knowledge of additional languages such as French, Spanish, German, Russian, Portuguese, Modern Greek, Turkish, and Italian Sign Language (LIS).

Participants represented a variety of Italian regions, with the largest group originating from Emilia-Romagna (n=14), followed by Veneto (n=11) and Lombardia (n=6). Smaller numbers of participants came from Campania (n=3), Toscana (n=2), Calabria (n=1), Lazio (n=1), Abruzzo (n=1), and Liguria (n=1).

All were recruited through personal networks, received no compensation, and gave informed consent prior to participation, in accordance with ethical research standards. Data collection took place between February and June 2025.

5.3 Results of the Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task

In this section, we provide the response coding and the analyses of the data. The quantitative analysis, which focuses exclusively on response accuracy, is presented in Section 5.3.1 and is introduced by the response coding procedure. The qualitative analysis is discussed in Section 5.3.2.

5.3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Response Accuracy

Response correctness was determined by a perfect match between the gender information grammatically conveyed in the verbal stimulus and the gender label selected by the participant. In the masculine and feminine singular conditions, only one answer was considered correct. For example, if the stimulus described a single male referent (e.g., *Il candidato* 'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG'), the correct response was *male*. Similarly, a stimulus introducing a female referent (e.g., *La candidata* 'The.F.SG candidate.F.SG') required the selection of *female* to be scored as correct.

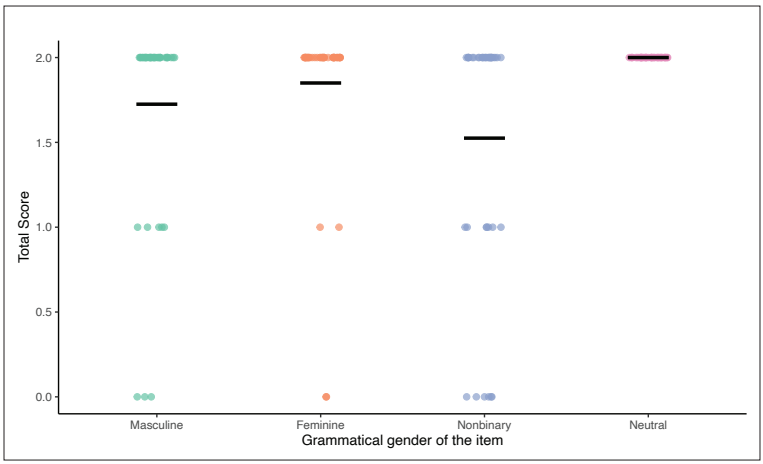
In the nonbinary condition, two answers were considered correct: *nonbinary* and *other*. This reflects the broader and more flexible interpretation space for gender identities. Any mismatch (e.g., selecting *female* for a description of a nonbinary referent) was scored zero.

The neutral condition admitted all four labels (*male, female, nonbinary, other*) as correct, assigning one point regardless of the selected option, since no specific gender marking was present in the stimulus, and any interpretation could be considered valid.

We checked whether there was a difference in response accuracy (scores) depending on the gender of the item. Descriptive statistics for accuracy by item gender are summarized in Table 35, while Graph 13 illustrates individual total scores along with group means for each gender category.

Table 35 Descriptive statistics of accuracy scores by item gender. Mean, median, standard deviation (SD), minimum, maximum, and sample size (*n*) are reported for each grammatical gender category

Item_gender	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum	n
Masculine	1.725	2	0.5986095	0	2	40
Feminine	1.850	2	0.4830459	0	2	40
Nonbinary	1.525	2	0.7506408	0	2	40
Neutral	2.000	2	0.0000000	0	2	40



Graph 13 Dotplot of individual total scores for each grammatical gender category. Black crossbars indicate group means, data points are jittered to reduce overlap, and colors differentiate the grammatical gender of the items

The analysis of total scores by the grammatical gender marking of the item reveals several notable trends. The highest scores were expectedly observed in the neutral (unmarked) condition, given that all responses were scored as correct (cf. Section 4.2.1). Feminine and masculine conditions, which reflect more familiar and conventional gender markers for participants, also showed high accuracy and a consistent distribution of scores. Interestingly, scores were slightly higher in the feminine condition compared to the masculine, which may suggest a greater ease in processing feminine forms, since the feminine offers fewer interpretive alternatives and more explicitly signals the intended referent. In contrast, the masculine might leave more room for ambiguity or competing interpretations, potentially leading to slightly lower accuracy.

A different pattern emerged in the nonbinary condition, where the overall performance was lower compared to the other conditions and scores displayed greater variability. This suggests that the innovative suffix used to mark nonbinary or unknown gender was not consistently interpreted or correctly associated with the intended referent. This inconsistency likely stems from the novelty of the suffix and participants' limited exposure to such forms.

In summary, the data indicate that conventional gender markers (masculine and feminine) are associated with higher accuracy, whereas the nonbinary condition introduces greater uncertainty and variability, potentially reflecting processing difficulty or limited familiarity with the suffix *-ə*.

To determine whether the grammatical gender of the items is a significant predictor of accuracy, we analyzed the data using a mixed-effects logistic regression model with the R package *lme4* (Bates et al. 2024; R Core Team 2021). The fixed effect in the model was the grammatical gender of the item (*item_gender*), while participants (*id*) and items (*item*) were included as random effects. The model formula was as follows:

Formula: score ~ item_gender + (1 | id) + (1 | item)

We found a significant main effect of grammatical gender ($p = 0.0489$). Specifically, the reference level used by R – masculine – was significantly different from the nonbinary level of the gender variable. This result confirms the data distribution displayed in Graph 13, which shows that participants achieved significantly lower accuracy on nonbinary items compared to the other levels of the variable (masculine, feminine, and neutral).

This suggests that participants struggle more with *ə*-marked forms, leading to reduced accuracy compared to items marked as masculine, feminine, or unmarked for gender.

5.3.2 Qualitative Analysis of Interpretation Patterns

This section examines the distribution of gender label selections across conditions, with the goal of identifying interpretive tendencies activated by the gendered neomorpheme in the absence of visual referents. The data for all four experimental conditions are summarized in Table 36.

Table 36 Percentages of participants selecting each of the four gender labels (*male*, *female*, *nonbinary*, *other*) across the four experimental conditions in the singular: masculine (*il candidato*), feminine (*la candidata*), nonbinary (*lə candidatə*), and neutral (*l'aspirante tutor*)

Item	M (%)	F (%)	NB (%)	OTHER (%)
Masculine singular 1	**85.00**	12.50	2.50	0.00
Masculine singular 2	**87.50**	10.00	2.50	0.00
Feminine singular 1	5.00	**95.00**	0.00	0.00
Feminine singular 2	5.00	**90.00**	5.00	0.00
Nonbinary singular 1	10.00	25.00	**60.00**	5.00
Nonbinary singular 2	10.00	7.50	**75.00**	7.50
Neutral singular 1	**50.00**	35.00	7.50	7.50
Neutral singular 2	**40.00**	27.50	12.50	20.00

For the masculine condition, the label *male* was selected by a clear majority of participants, confirming a strong tendency to interpret the masculine form as specifically male. These figures support the interpretation that even in the absence of images, the masculine form in singular contexts is largely perceived as referring to a male individual. However, the masculine form is not interpreted exclusively as referring to a male since the *female* label was also selected, and this occurred in higher percentages when compared to the selections of *male* in the feminine condition. The data indeed show a clear predominance of the *female* label (90–95%), with minimal selection of *nonbinary* or *male*, confirming that the feminine singular form is interpreted almost exclusively as referring to a female individual.

Building on the interpretation patterns observed in the main experiment (cf. Section 4.2.3), where the nonbinary singular form *lə candidatə* was more frequently matched with a female referent, the follow-up data reveal a notable shift. The majority of participants selected the label *nonbinary* in both items (60% and 75%, respectively), suggesting that in the absence of images, the neomorpheme *-ə* is more transparently read as indexing a nonbinary referent. Importantly, when aggregating the data, *female* remains the second most selected label. In the first item, it accounts for 25% of the responses, while

in the second item, it drops to 7.5%, just below the stable 10% for *male*. This persistence of the *female* label, albeit reduced, points to a residual interpretive association between the neomorpheme and the female gender, which will be further explored in the discussion. The minimal selection of *other* suggests that participants did not broadly interpret the form as referencing identities beyond those explicitly provided. Overall, these results indicate that removing visual references helps reduce ambiguity and promotes a more consistent and targeted interpretation of the nonbinary morpheme.

The neutral condition, which lacks overt grammatical gender markers, simply confirms the trends already identified in the main study **[tab. 22]**. The *male* label remains the most frequently selected across both neutral items (50% and 40%), with *female* selections at lower percentages (35% and 27.5%). The *nonbinary* and *other* labels appear less frequently and do not reach comparable levels, with only one exception: *other* surprisingly reaches 20% in the second neutral item. This pattern overall confirms that even without explicit gender cues, participants tend to default to a male interpretation rather than distributing their choices more evenly among other gender categories.

A general observation is that the internal distribution of gender attributions appears clearer in the current experimental design. This structure allows for a clearer differentiation of the degrees of masculinity, femininity, and nonbinariness inherent to each condition, offering a more nuanced understanding of how gender is perceived and processed linguistically. Admittedly, the testing setting, together with the fixed order of label presentation, may have also plausibly played a role. The presence of specific and unambiguous labels naturally facilitates a more precise and immediate categorization, especially when compared with the use of images, which can introduce ambiguity due to variability in interpretation, cultural assumptions, and other contextual factors. At the same time, once participants recognize that a candidate can be female, they may be more inclined to assign *male* labels to other items, and similarly when they realize that a candidate can be nonbinary, potentially accentuating the internal differentiation observed. Thus, while the design highlights genuine tendencies in gender attribution, these methodological factors should be taken into account when interpreting the distribution patterns.

5.4 Results of the SILUI

This section presents the results of the SILUI, focusing on the most frequently selected response options for each item. Table 37 summarizes the modal values across the scale, replicating the format used in Table 29 (cf. Section 4.3). The commentary below is restricted

to scores that deviate from those observed with the previous sample; the differences in scores are highlighted in bold in the table to guide the reader's attention.

Table 37 Summary of modal responses for each item of the SILUI questionnaire, along with the corresponding level of agreement, perceived sexism, or willingness to adopt inclusive language (follow-up study)

Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 1	Giorgia Meloni goes by "Mr President". That is to be considered a sexist choice.	Agreement	4
Item 2	We should not change the way the Italian language has traditionally been written and spoken.	Disagreement	2
Item 3	Inclusive language is a trivial matter.	Disagreement	**1**
Item 4	The masculine plural is not really inclusive, still we should continue to use it to refer to mixed groups of people (e.g., males, females, and nonbinary people) because it is more immediate.	Agreement	4
Item 5	When a person does not identify with the binary distinction of gender, it is only fair that we refer to that person with *ə*: e.g., *studentə* 'student.NB.SG'.	Agreement	4
Item 6	The Italian language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.	Agreement	**4**
Item 7	The elimination of the sexist use of the Italian language is an important goal.	Strong agreement	5
Item 8	Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid the sexist use of language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 9	The sexist use of the Italian language is related to sexist treatment of people in the Italian society.	Strong agreement	**5**
Item 10	If there are males, females, and nonbinary people in a group of people, it is appropriate to refer to them with *ə*: e.g., not *gli studenti* 'the.M.PL students.M.PL' but *lə studentə* 'the.NB.PL students.NB.PL'.	Neutral	**3**
Item 11	Teachers who require students to use Italian nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.	Strong disagreement	**1**
Item 12	Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate the sexist use of the Italian language.	Strong agreement	5
Item 13	It is only fair that "mother" and "father" remain on children's ID cards blowing up the neutral qualifiers "parent 1" and "parent 2".	Disagreement	**1/2**
Item 14	Marta is a trans woman born.M.SG in 1986.	Clear sexism	5

Item	Corresponding full statement	Most frequently selected level of AGR/SEX/WILL	Mode score on the 5-point Likert scale
Item 15	Lucia does not identify with the binary distinction of gender. Lucia was raised.F.SG in Modena.	Sexism	4
Item 16	Serena passed the bar exam. Serena is now an.M.SG attorney.M.SG.	Sexism	**4**
Item 17	The.F.PL elementary school teachers.F.PL tend to give so much space to recreational activities.	Sexism	**4**
Item 18	How willing are you to start an email with *cari studenti* 'dear.M.PL students.M.PL', *care studentesse* 'dear.F.PL students.F.PL' and *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 19	How willing are you to start an email with *carə studentə* 'dear.NB.PL students.NB.PL' knowing that among the recipients are males, females, and people who do not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5
Item 20	How willing are you to use the term *candidatə* 'candidate.NB.SG' instead of *candidato* 'candidate.M.SG' when the referent does not identify with the binary distinction of gender?	Utmost willingness	5

Items 3, 9, 11, and 13 confirm the stance taken by the sample of the main study, with responses aligning on the same end of the scale but shifted further toward the extreme (e.g., where the previous sample selected 2, participants now choose 1). This indicates not a change in overall attitude, but a stronger, more decisive endorsement of the same position. Responses to items 6, 16, and 17, however, change drastically.

In Item 6, the sample expresses a notably more realistic and pragmatic – and somewhat pessimistic – stance compared to the previous group, strongly acknowledging that Italian's deep cultural roots make meaningful linguistic change extremely difficult. This response reflects an understanding that linguistic change, especially at a systemic level, faces significant resistance due to its entanglement with identity, history, and everyday communication. Such recognition highlights the challenges inherent in promoting inclusive language reforms, emphasizing that shifts in language use often require gradual, collective efforts over extended periods rather than rapid or straightforward transformations.

In Item 16, where the previous sample showed divided opinions on the statement's sexist nature, the new sample demonstrates a clear consensus recognizing it as sexist. This shift suggests increased

understanding and awareness, indicating that the follow-up sample is better informed on these issues. Item 17 further confirms this trend, as the new sample clearly recognizes the sexist nature of the statement, reinforcing evidence of increased sensitivity toward such instances of sexist language use.

A slightly different pattern emerges in Item 10, which addresses the practical implementation of the use of *-ə* to inclusively refer to mixed-gender groups. Here, the follow-up sample adopts a neutral stance, selecting the midpoint of the scale. This response mirrors the previous sample's internal division between agreement and disagreement, suggesting that while participants may endorse inclusive language in principle, they remain cautious or uncertain when it comes to its concrete application in daily linguistic practice.

In summary, while several items reveal consistent attitudes with stronger conviction, the notable shifts observed in Items 6, 16, and 17 underscore a growing realism and heightened awareness regarding linguistic change and sexism. These changes may suggest that the follow-up sample approaches issues of inclusive language with greater critical engagement and sensitivity, reflecting how the topic has become increasingly central in public discourse over the roughly eighteen months separating the first data collection (November-December 2023) from the follow-up (February-June 2025) – an ongoing evolution that may influence future language use and reform efforts.

5.5 Results of the Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

This section explores participants' reading habits as well as their exposure to the inclusive use of the Italian language. It is important to note from the outset that due to technical issues, responses from two participants could not be collected; these are therefore marked as NA in the tables that follow.

In response to Item 1, 21% of the participants reported that they read exclusively for study or work-related purposes, while an equal percentage (21%) stated that they read solely for leisure, during their free time. The majority (58%) indicated that they engage in reading for both academic or professional needs and personal enjoyment.

Readers' familiarity with various text genres was assessed through Item 2, with response frequencies reported in Table 38. Overall, the most frequently read category is online information, with 75% of the participants stating they read it often or very often. Fiction also shows high engagement, with 57.5% reporting frequent reading. In contrast, nonfiction is read rarely or never by over half the participants (52.5%), while technical documentation shows a similar trend, with 57.5% of the respondents indicating limited exposure (i.e., rarely

or never). Scientific literature is read often or very often by 25%, while 47.5% engage with it only occasionally or not at all. Periodical press follows a similar pattern, with 62.5% of the participants reading it rarely or never. School and university textbooks remain relatively familiar, as 50% of the participants read them often or very often. These findings suggest that participants' general familiarity with technical documentation is limited, making it unlikely that the text genre used in the *Text-Based Candidate Evaluation Task* (i.e., technical documentation) facilitated comprehension to the extent of overshadowing the introduced morphological innovation.

Table 38 Percentages of participants stating their reading frequency of different text genres, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Text genre	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
School/university textbooks	5.00	17.50	22.50	20.00	30.00	5.00
Scientific literature	12.50	35.00	22.50	15.00	10.00	5.00
Technical documentation	17.50	40.00	27.50	7.50	2.50	5.00
Fiction	7.50	7.50	22.50	27.50	30.00	5.00
Nonfiction	32.50	20.00	17.50	12.50	12.50	5.00
Periodical press	32.50	30.00	12.50	15.00	5.00	5.00
Online information	0.00	5.00	15.00	32.50	42.50	5.00

The approximate amount of time participants reported spending on daily reading was gathered through Item 3. Most participants (42.5%) reported reading between 1 and 2 hours per day, followed by 22.5% who read 2 to 3 hours. A smaller group (20%) read less than one hour daily, while only 2.5% reported reading 3 to 4 hours, and 7.5% read more than 4 hours per day. Considering that reading time may contribute to participants' ability to process linguistic innovations through varied strategies, these findings point to a generally moderate level of reading engagement, in line with the trends observed in the main study.

The number of books read for leisure over the past year, assessed through Item 4, offers further insight into participants' reading habits and overall expertise. The largest portion (37.5%) reported reading fewer than five books, followed by 27.5% who read between five and ten. As the number of books increases, the percentage of readers decreases: 12.5% read 11-15 books, 15% read 16-20, and only 2.5% reported reading more than 20 books. These figures suggest a generally moderate engagement with extended reading, consistent with the pattern observed in the main study.

Items 5 and 6 explore participants' media habits by examining both the frequency of use across print and digital platforms (see Table 39) and individual media preferences. Print media remains a widely used format, with 70% of the participants stating they read from print either often or very often. The smartphone also emerged as a commonly used medium, with 57.5% reading from it frequently. Computers are used often or very often by 47.5% of the participants. In contrast, tablets and e-readers are used far less: 57.5% never read from a tablet, and 75% never read from an e-reader. When asked to indicate their preferred medium, a strong majority (80%) expressed a preference for print, while only one participant (2.5%) favored digital media. These results largely confirm the predominance of print media in participants' reading habits – already attested with the previous sample – in contrast with the digital format used during the experiment.

Table 39 Percentages of participants stating their frequency of use of different media, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Medium	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
Print media	0.00	5.00	20.00	30.00	40.00	5.00
Smartphone	5.00	17.50	15.00	20.00	37.50	5.00
Computer	12.50	17.50	17.50	27.50	20.00	5.00
Tablet	57.50	7.50	15.00	2.50	12.50	5.00
E-reader	75.00	7.50	0.00	2.50	10.00	5.00

The follow-up study confirms a broadly positive view of reading (see Table 40), in line with the sample of the main study **[tab. 32]**. A strong majority (87.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that reading is important, remaining substantial, but not as high as the earlier 98.75%. Enjoyment levels also remained high, with 82.5% finding reading enjoyable – slightly more participants strongly agreed this time.

Perceptions of reading as boring further declined: 90% disagreed with this statement, and no one agreed, improving on the previous 83.75%. The main divergence concerns reading as a demanding activity: 20% of the participants agreed it is hard, and 32.5% remained neutral, suggesting more varied perceptions of reading effort compared to the main sample.

Overall, participants continue to value and enjoy reading, though views on its difficulty appear more divided in this second group.

Table 40 Percentages of participants expressing their assent/dissent to each statement, divided by the level of agreement indicated (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) (follow-up study)

Statement	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	NA (%)
Reading is an enjoyable activity	0.00	2.50	10.00	30.00	52.50	5.00
Reading is a boring activity	40.00	50.00	2.50	2.50	0.00	5.00
Reading is important	0.00	0.00	7.50	10.00	77.50	5.00
Reading is hard	25.00	17.50	32.50	20.00	0.00	5.00

Based on the self-assessment in Item 8, participants were classified according to their perceived reading competence. The majority identified as experienced readers (57.5%), followed by regular readers (25%). These results suggest a slightly stronger overall confidence in reading ability compared to the previous sample **[graph 10]**. The current group presents a slightly higher concentration of participants who identify as experienced readers, while the proportion of those at either end of the self-assessed competence scale (i.e., naïve or very experienced readers) remains limited.

The second part of the questionnaire begins with Item 9, which distinguishes between participants who were already familiar with inclusive language prior to the experiment and those who had no prior exposure to the concept. This time, only one participant reported never having come across inclusive language, further corroborating earlier observations that exposure to this phenomenon, fostered by public debate, is steadily increasing.

The follow-up study confirms and further strengthens the rationale behind focusing our experimental analysis on the innovative suffix *-ə* as a potentially inclusive linguistic strategy. Among all the orthographic markers, *-ə* once again emerged as the most widely recognized through Item 10. In fact, 22.5% of the participants reported encountering it very often, a figure slightly lower than the 23.75% observed in the main sample **[tab. 33]**. Additionally, 20% stated they had seen it *often* and 25% *sometimes*, indicating a consistent and relatively high degree of exposure. Surprisingly, the proportion of respondents who had never encountered the neomorpheme *-ə* remained consistent across both studies, at 17.5%, indicating nonetheless a stable level of baseline familiarity with the form over time.

In contrast, alternative strategies such as the asterisk (*), while still relatively common, experienced a decline in the *very often* category (from 22.5% to 15%), and the 'at' sign (@) showed a stark decrease in frequent recognition: no participant in the follow-up reported seeing it *very often*, unlike the 7.5% in the original sample. Similarly, the underscore (_) and other less conventional markers

like *x* and *u* remained the least familiar, with 80% and 57.5% of the respondents respectively indicating they had *never* encountered them – figures that are either stable or slightly worse compared to the first round of data.

These results not only validate our decision to center the study around the *-ə* suffix, but also suggest a broader trend toward its gradual normalization within the inclusive linguistic landscape, marking it as the most prominent and recognizable among the emerging orthographic strategies.

Table 41 Percentages of participants stating the frequency with which they had previously encountered the strategies of inclusive language listed, divided into five levels (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) (follow-up study)

Strategy of inclusive language	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very often (%)	NA (%)
Coordination of feminine and masculine terms	5.00	0.00	17.50	30.00	42.50	5.00
Collective nouns	2.50	12.50	32.50	20.00	27.50	5.00
"*****" as the word ending	20.00	12.50	22.50	25.00	15.00	5.00
"**@**" as the word ending	45.00	27.50	12.50	10.00	0.00	5.00
"**_**" as the word ending	80.00	10.00	2.50	2.50	0.00	5.00
"***x***" as the word ending	57.50	25.00	5.00	7.50	0.00	5.00
"***u***" as the word ending	50.00	17.50	22.50	2.50	2.50	5.00
"**ə**" as the word ending	17.50	10.00	25.00	20.00	22.50	5.00

In addition to the inclusive language strategies formally included in the previous table, several alternative practices emerged from participants' open-ended responses to Item 11. Among these, some reported the use of 'y' as a neutral plural suffix, and others cited the slash (e.g., *salve a tutt/*) or direct vowel truncation (e.g., *ciao a tutt*) as gender-neutral solutions. A few participants also mentioned the use of '3' as a final character (e.g., *ciao a tutt3*), mimicking phonetic or visual neutrality. Interestingly, one respondent referenced the intentional overextension of the feminine form, less as a grammatical device and more as a political statement. Another pointed to the existence of carefully selected inclusive expressions embedded in certain dialects. However, no specific examples were provided, and the respondent noted that such dialectal forms may be unsuitable in academic or professional contexts due to their informal or localized nature. These observations highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of inclusive language practices, revealing creative grassroots strategies that often fall outside institutionalized norms.

Item 12 aimed to identify the most common text genres in which the *-ə* ending appears. The vast majority of participants (90%)

indicated social media as the primary space for encountering this form, followed by online information sources more broadly (67.5%). Periodical press was selected by 15% of the respondents, while all other options registered minimal percentages. These results align closely with those of the main sample **[graph 11]**, confirming the strong association between the innovative suffix and digital communication environments.

The final section of the questionnaire explored participants' perceptions of the innovative suffix *-ə*, focusing first on its potential to hinder reading (Item 13) and then on its performativity and intelligibility (Item 14). Compared to the previous sample, results indicate a greater tolerance toward the use of *-ə* **[tab. 34]**. A clear majority (62.5% of the participants) did not consider it an obstacle to reading, selecting either level 2 on the Likert scale (37.5%) or explicitly stating that it was not an obstacle at all (25%). Only 15% viewed it as a real hindrance, while 17.5% expressed uncertainty.

As for phonetic production and interpretation, the findings confirm that pronunciation remains the main difficulty, while interpretation is generally unproblematic. The majority of participants (27 out of 40) found the suffix difficult to pronounce but easy to understand, while only 4 reported difficulties on both fronts. 6 participants indicated ease in both pronunciation and comprehension, and none found it easy to pronounce but hard to understand.[1] These results reinforce the idea that despite phonetic challenges, the meaning of the suffix *-ə* is becoming increasingly accessible, suggesting a growing familiarity with its function in inclusive language. These findings broadly mirror those of the main sample **[graph 12]**, reinforcing the persistent challenge of pronunciation while highlighting a consistent ease in semantic interpretation across both studies.

1 One participant selected two contradictory responses instead of a single answer and was excluded from the analysis.

6 General Discussion

The data collected through the main experiment (SPMT) confirmed an overall lower level of accuracy when participants dealt with the innovative suffix *-ə* compared to the masculine and feminine conditions. While this trend persists to some extent in the follow-up study (TCET) – where the nonbinary condition still shows the lowest accuracy – it nonetheless registers a significant increase in performance relative to the first experiment. The overall improvement observed in the TCET applies across all singular conditions, i.e., nonbinary, masculine, and feminine alike, but is particularly striking in the nonbinary case. This may be attributed to the different task design: the absence of images in the follow-up experiment eliminated visual interference, allowing participants to focus directly on linguistic cues and produce more reliable accuracy scores. The more transparent structure of the TCET thus appears to have enhanced participants' ability to accurately process each linguistic form.

These general trends take on greater significance when anchored to the specific findings of the three analyses conducted on the SPMT. *Analysis 1* (Section 4.2.2.1) indeed showed that the lowest accuracy is found in the nonbinary singular condition, while the masculine

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/006

and feminine conditions obtained a higher, identical score. The main finding revealed by *Analysis 2* (Section 4.2.2.2) points to the actual interpretation of the nonbinary plural condition, i.e., one that serves as a representation of a mixed-gender group that may be composed by male and female members only. Although the exclusively nonbinary group (i.e., NBNBNB) received the highest percentage of selections, the mixed-gender groups lacking a nonbinary member ranked second in frequency. *Analysis 2* indeed proved – through the sharp drop in score recorded for the nonbinary plural condition as a consequence of leaving out MMF and FFM groups – that the groups including at least one nonbinary individual selected by participants were few. Hence, there appears to be a tendency for the innovative suffix *-ə* to be interpreted rather frequently as referring to a mixed group of males and females, without a nonbinary person. It follows that the inclusive use of *-ə* does not necessarily imply nonbinary participation, thus partly redefining the concept of inclusiveness conveyed. Activation of a nonbinary referent in the presence of *-ə* is therefore by no means to be taken for granted.

As far as response times are concerned, what emerges from *Analysis 3* (Section 4.2.2.3) is that higher levels of traditional gender markedness were found to aid in reducing response time, as participants were fastest in dealing with the feminine and masculine conditions. The one exception is the masculine appearing in the plural condition, which recorded a rather slow mean response time. In all likelihood, this is due to the opposition in meaning (i.e., specific *vs* generic) that it generates, posing some sort of conflict to be handled by participants. The fact that the masculine can have a generic meaning might have caused longer response times precisely because it took longer for participants to decide which referents to choose, as opposed to what happened with the feminine, which was predominantly assigned an exclusively-female meaning. The same reasoning can be applied to the neutral condition: being completely deprived of any gender cue, the wide margin of choice prevents participants from an immediate disambiguation, since the selection of potentially any referent is grammatically correct. It is therefore not surprising that the neutral condition is the one with the slowest mean response time in the plural-condition task, and the second-slowest in the singular-condition task. The nonbinary condition was identified as the most irregular condition, as it was attributed the slowest mean response time in the singular-condition task, as opposed to the fastest mean response time in the plural-condition task. This opposite trend might suggest total hesitation in having to identify the corresponding single referent indicated by *-ə* in the singular condition and the maximum freedom to which its plural counterpart alludes to. Diametrically opposite mean response times

thus seem to reflect the different response strategies when dealing with singular and plural *-ə*.

The examination of the internal distribution of the assigned genders through images per condition, carried out in Section 4.2.3, has shed light on the possible conflicts that surfaced from the matching procedure. For the masculine singular condition, a distinct preference for pictures previously rated as 'male' was markedly detected, confirming the activation of the specific reading of the masculine form (cf. Safina 2024 for similar results). The opposition arising with the plural (i.e., specific *vs* generic meaning) seems to be resolved in favor of a specific interpretation of the masculine plural form, as the majority of participants selected a male-only group, rather than a mixed-gender one. This evidence supports the existence of a bias embedded in the masculine form according to which an interpretation of an exclusivity of male referents is naturally triggered. This bias found in Italian is consistent with previous results in other languages (see Section 1.5).

It is worth pointing out that the group obtaining the second-highest score for the masculine plural condition was the FFM group, that is, one with a female majority. This outcome is likely related to the fact that both masculine plural items referred to roles such as "fixed-term type A researchers" and "research fellows", which correspond to lower-ranking academic positions where female representation in Italy remains relatively strong. According to 2023 data from the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR), women comprised 50% of research fellows (Grade D) and 46% of junior researchers (Grade C), but their representation drops progressively at higher career levels: 43% among associate professors (Grade B) and only 28% among full professors (Grade A) (MUR 2025, 8). These figures help explain why participants may have associated those entry-level roles with women, contributing to the selection of the FFM group. This steep decline in female presence at higher academic ranks is well-documented and often discussed in public discourse under the label of the 'glass ceiling'. Therefore, the prevalence of female-majority group selections may reflect not only the actual distribution of women in early academic roles but also a broader awareness – partly grounded in public and media narratives – of gender disparities in Italian academia. In this sense, participants' choices align with both statistical data and broader socio-cultural narratives, rather than being merely shaped by collective imagination.

Turning now to the scrutiny of the neutral singular condition, all genders displayed a rather fair representation, based on their frequency of occurrence. Nonetheless, when no gender information was provided, participants defaulted to male. This trend is also reflected in the neutral plural condition, as the male-only group reports the highest frequency of occurrence in the first neutral

plural item. The FFM group was instead selected by the majority of participants in the second neutral item. Given that both items in the neutral plural condition referred to "members of the research team", it is plausible that participants' interpretations aligned with actual demographic distributions in Italian academia, as the recent MUR data provided above confirm. This recurring preference for a female-majority group may thus reflect an implicit awareness of the structural positioning of women in the academic hierarchy – assigning them a central role in research teams, while men remain more strongly associated with top-level positions. Rather than projecting abstract gender balances, participants may have unconsciously mirrored the current gendered division of labor in academia, where women are more visible and numerous in early-stage academic roles. Alternatively, perhaps it is the order in which the images were presented that affected participants' choices in conditions where there is no grammatical gender clue. The first group encountered by participants in the first neutral item was in fact the MMM group. As for the second neutral item, the FFM group was the second group to be introduced. Participants may have therefore settled on the first plausible option without necessarily considering the remaining alternatives.

Looking at the feminine condition, which at first glance appears entirely unambiguous, we observed that singular feminine forms elicited a highly systematic mapping onto female referents, while also triggering nonbinary interpretations to a noticeable extent. This variability becomes even more marked in the plural, where there is a consistent preference for female-only groups alongside a clearly visible secondary assignment to nonbinary-only groups. This reflects a perceptible closeness between female and nonbinary referents, a pattern further corroborated by the data from the nonbinary condition. In the nonbinary singular condition, the vast majority of participants selected the image representing a female referent – a finding interpreted by one reviewer as potentially resulting from visual stimuli that reflected a distorted representation of gender. This observation raised the concern that participants may have interpreted the images intended to depict nonbinary individuals as female, and vice versa. As statistically supported by the significantly lower accuracy observed in the nonbinary condition, this interpretive bias may have undermined the classification of certain responses as nonbinary. While this is a legitimate observation and we acknowledge that some images may not have fully conveyed a clear departure from binary gender norms, we believe several methodological features mitigate this issue.

First, all visual stimuli used to represent nonbinary individuals – as well as male and female individuals – were independently rated by an American sample prior to the original experiment, and subsequently

validated by an additional, independent Italian sample, distinct from the participants involved in the main study. No significant discrepancies emerged between the two groups in how the images were interpreted, suggesting that potential cultural differences in gender perception were minimal, if present at all. Second, and perhaps more importantly, these images were never presented in isolation. Each nonbinary image or group was always displayed alongside – hence shown in contrast with – overtly and stereotypically male and female alternatives. This contrastive structure was designed precisely to help participants disambiguate gender identity through relative comparison. Even if the nonbinary images were not visually optimal or entirely unambiguous, participants encountered them alongside referents that were stereotypically binary, making it more likely that they would interpret the former as belonging to a distinct, nonbinary category. In other words, the contrastive format made it possible for participants to interpret them in relative terms, as different from both male and female options. Importantly, in the nonbinary plural condition marked with the innovative suffix *-ə*, participants most frequently selected the NBNBNB group, further suggesting that they interpreted these figures as neither male nor female, but as a separate gender category. While we acknowledge that visual representations inevitably allow for a degree of interpretive flexibility, the consistency with which participants associated these images with nonbinary linguistic input reinforces the validity of our classification, ultimately supporting the possible exclusive association of the suffix *-ə* with nonbinary referents. Nonetheless, a considerable portion of participants still opted for mixed-gender groups that did not include nonbinary candidates. This finding suggests that although the specific reading of the innovative suffix as denoting nonbinary identity appears to dominate, a more generic or inclusive interpretation may persist to some extent. In this respect, our data point to a more cautious and gradual shift than the one hypothesized by Thornton (2022; see Section 2.2.2), who suggested a possible refunctionalization of *-ə* toward a fully generic plural. Rather than contradicting this perspective outright, our results highlight the coexistence of both readings, with a preference for the specific nonbinary interpretation within our sample.

The follow-up experiment, which removed all visual stimuli and relied exclusively on linguistic input, offers further evidence. A clear majority of participants selected the *nonbinary* label in the condition marked by the neomorpheme; yet, among the remaining responses, *female* was the most frequently chosen alternative, followed by fewer *other* or *male* selections. The persistence of *female* as the second-most frequent choice – even in the absence of visual referents – confirms that the interpretive bias toward the female over the male when processing forms marked with the innovative suffix *-ə* is not primarily

perceptual but likely grammatical in nature and has presumably to do with the morphological structure of the nonbinary forms. The graphic presence of the schwa (*ə*) after the consonant *l* in the determiner, for instance, may be processed as analogous to the suffix *-a* in the feminine determiner *la*. In contrast, the masculine form displays the vowel *i* before the consonant (cf. *il*). In addition, the nonbinary *ə* has a certain level of proximity with the feminine (plural) suffix *-e*, which hardly leaves room for a male reading. The argument that *lə* alone may carry a slight bias toward female reference is, however, weakened by the findings from the nonbinary plural condition, which is also built around the form *lə*: cf. *lə candidatə* 'the.NB.SG/PL candidate.NB.SG/PL'. In this case, nonbinary-only groups were most frequently chosen, demonstrating that the determiner itself does not drive the preference for female referents. Crucially, this proves that the same *lə* form can produce different interpretive outcomes depending on the grammatical context: in the singular, the presence of *l*+*ə* may nudge participants toward a female interpretation, whereas in the plural, the grammatical context (e.g., surrounding nouns) allows the innovative suffix to convey its intended nonbinary meaning, effectively overriding any apparent bias associated with the determiner. Precisely because the same form can lead to such diverse interpretations (i.e., femaleness *vs* nonbinariness), we cannot conclude that the determiner itself has a direct effect on assignment choices.

When considering the role of image removals, it is worth noting – without making it the main focus, for the reasons outlined above – that the feminine condition offers a valuable insight. With feminine items, we found that eliminating visual stimuli led to higher accuracy. The selection of the *nonbinary* label dropped in fact to nearly zero (0-5%). This suggests that the previously observed co-selection of female and nonbinary depicted referents when matching the description *la candidata* 'the.F.SG candidate.F.SG' was possibly driven by the perceptual closeness of some of the images, indicating a more consistent activation of the intended gender when the feminine form is presented alone, thereby assigning a role – or at least some influence – to the dimension represented by the images in the gender-assignment process. Reduced visual interference contributed to higher overall accuracy, including the nonbinary condition, where *female* selections decreased. This suggests that the original visuals may have partially biased participants toward female interpretations. However, it is important to highlight that the nonbinary condition still produced the lowest accuracy. This indicates that despite clearer task design provided by the TCET, the innovative suffix *-ə*, being a non-native and non-established grapheme corresponding to a non-native phoneme, continues to pose cognitive and linguistic challenges for Italian speakers. Its lack of anchoring in the traditional

morphological, phonological, and syntactic system of the language likely contributes to this difficulty. The follow-up experiment, while more explicit in its aims and less 'masked' in design, did not manage to eliminate this challenge.

The responses collected through the questionnaire on the *Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian* (SILUI), reported in Section 4.3 and Section 5.4, revealed that overall, our sample of participants is determined to embrace change, in abandoning the sexist use of the Italian language in favor of an inclusive one, despite a strong awareness of the complexity of the initial circumstances. However, participants seem to hesitate in adopting morphological innovations. With the generic use of the masculine plural introduced in Item 4, for instance, participants are not prepared to drop it. They are tempted to maintain it as it is a linguistically-economic strategy that guarantees straightforwardness. Others still struggle with recognizing sexist language, especially with the adoption of masculine occupational terms to refer to a female individual (Item 16). This finding applies only to the SPMT-sample, given that the TCET-sample was largely able to recognize the degree of sexism in this instance. When asked to make use of the *-ə* suffix to refer to an exclusive-nonbinary plurality, or a single nonbinary referent, or a mixed-gender group (in so doing, introducing a single short form to represent all genders), the majority of participants across both samples welcomed the three different proposals. The only conflicting information deriving from the participants' responses has to do with the use of *-ə* as a general, common word-ending to indicate a group whose gender composition is not known or of a mixed nature, as the majority (from both samples) first did not agree with such a use put forward in Item 10, to then welcome it in Item 19. As much as the object under investigation (i.e., the use of the single inclusive plural suffix *-ə*) is identical in both items, the questions are actually exploring quite different related aspects, in that Item 10 is directly asking, in more absolute terms, to express a judgment as to whether the proposed use is deemed appropriate as well as fair; Item 19, on the other hand, is addressing the participants' willingness to eventually adopt such a strategy. Morality aside, it is testing their being ready to put it in use.

As for the *Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits* (cf. Section 4.4 and Section 5.5), which was included to profile our participants according to their level of expertise in reading and their level of exposure to inclusive language (with a focus on the innovative suffix *-ə*), the majority of participants consider themselves experienced readers. Furthermore, the importance of reading was acknowledged by them all, who also expressed a strong preference for reading on paper. The vast majority of participants claimed to be familiar with inclusive language. As predicted, among the punctuation marks and orthographic markers listed, the innovative

suffix -ə was the most frequently recognized by participants, yet mostly confined to the social and news industry, particularly online. Through the last two questions, we were able to understand to what extent the 'ə' symbol impacts on the process of reading as well as the criticalities arising from producing it phonetically and interpreting it. Although most participants do not see it as an obstacle to reading, they find it quite difficult to pronounce, yet easy to interpret.

7 Conclusions

This study is among the first experimental investigations into the use of the innovative suffix *-ə* to designate individuals of unknown, unspecified, or nonbinary gender in Italian (cf. Abbondanza et al. 2025; also see Comandini 2021 and Thornton 2022 for corpus-based research). While countless strategies have been put forward to pursue a gender-fair language, this study focuses on the most widely discussed one, that is, *-ə*, which unlike others (e.g., -*, -@), benefits from a predetermined correspondence to a sound, however unfamiliar to most speakers of Italian. Despite intense debate over its potential, little experimental evidence exists to support any particular stance. This study addresses that gap by examining how the suffix *-ə* is interpreted when referring to a single referent or a plurality.

Three main research questions guided the investigation. The first addressed meaning: does the suffix *-ə* manage to immediately refer to an individual who does not identify with the binary distinction of gender (i.e., specific/exclusive meaning)? Does it activate a reference with a nonbinary group (i.e., specific/exclusive meaning) or a mixed-gender group (i.e., generic/inclusive meaning)? The second explored processing costs: does *-ə* require longer response times

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/007

than traditional gendered suffixes, suggesting cognitive effort? The third questioned the so-called generic masculine: does it actually function inclusively, or is it predominantly interpreted as referring exclusively to male individuals? Here too, the specific *vs* generic meaning distinction is central.

To address the first research question – establishing the meaning of the suffix *-ə* – accuracy was measured through two different analyses. The results were then supplemented by examining the internal distribution of gender selections in the nonbinary condition, based on image choices, to determine which gender interpretation was most prevalent. To ensure the reliability of the visual stimuli, a norming survey (the *Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey*) was conducted prior to the experiment, confirming that the selected images were consistently identified as female, male, or nonbinary. Following the procedure established by Bradley and colleagues (2019), a separate sample of participants was recruited to rate a total of 24 stock photos, originally tested on an American sample by Bradley's research team. Using an independent 10-point scale, participants assigned each depicted individual a perceived level of femininity-masculinity. The ratings from the Italian sample closely matched those collected by Bradley and colleagues (2019); as such, no cultural differences emerged between the two groups, and participants showed no uncertainty in recognizing and correctly classifying the photos labeled as nonbinary. These findings confirmed that the nonbinary images were not perceived as problematic – at least in the context of the survey. As previously noted, this is further reinforced by their presentation mode in the SPMT: they were never shown in isolation, but always in direct contrast with both male and female referents. To address any potential confounding effects posed by the presence of images, a follow-up experiment (i.e., the TCET) was designed without visual stimuli, allowing us to focus exclusively on the linguistic input.

In the SPMT, both analyses revealed significantly lower accuracy in the nonbinary singular condition, indicating that participants struggled more to match nonbinary descriptions with the corresponding images than they did with masculine or feminine ones. We thus detected a significant difference in response accuracy that depended on the grammatical gender of the item.

In the plural condition, nonbinary forms were frequently interpreted as referring to mixed-gender (male and female) groups, as indicated by the drop in accuracy in the second analysis, as a result of leaving out both FFM and MMF groups. This suggests an interpretation of the suffix *-ə* as signaling inclusiveness within the binary spectrum, even in the absence of explicit nonbinary referents. Nonetheless, the majority of participants still selected the exclusively nonbinary group (NBNBNB), indicating a clear preference for the

specific meaning over the generic one. This outcome appears to challenge the transitional trend identified by Thornton (2022, cf. Section 2.2.2), which consists of a shift from specific to generic use of the suffix *-ə*. While our data highlight the coexistence of the two readings, they ultimately show that the specific, identity-based interpretation remains strongly anchored in participants' responses.

In examining the nonbinary singular condition, the SPMT results showed that the specific interpretation of the suffix *-ə* was still far from being fully established. A higher percentage of participants matched the description of a nonbinary candidate with a female referent rather than correctly identifying a nonbinary one. This led us to two conclusions: first, in the singular, the suffix *-ə* does not yet reliably prompt a specific nonbinary reading, as it tends to activate a female interpretation instead. Second, in the plural, the same suffix successfully triggered an immediate association with a nonbinary-only group (specific meaning) and, to a lesser extent, a mixed-gender group (generic meaning). However, the follow-up study (TCET) paints a more optimistic picture when it comes to the use of the neomorpheme for the singular: in the absence of visual stimuli, overall accuracy improved, particularly in the nonbinary singular condition. This suggests that under different experimental conditions, where linguistic cues are processed without visual interference, even the singular use of the suffix *-ə* may prove sufficiently effective. However, this improvement cannot be solely attributed to the removal of images. It is likely that some part of the progress reflects the growing public awareness and attention to the use of the suffix *-ə*, developed during the eighteen months between the main data collection and the follow-up, as also confirmed by the responses collected via the SILUI. In other words, the observed improvement may result from both cognitive factors related to reduced visual interference and heightened familiarity with inclusive linguistic forms. Furthermore, the revised experimental design itself may have contributed: by presenting participants with immediately interpretable labels, the task facilitated a more consistent categorization, reducing oscillations and allowing for more precise matching. Together, these findings indicate that the suffix *-ə* is gaining interpretive traction.

In sum, while the concern regarding image interpretation is valid and noted, we contend that the experimental design of the main study – especially the validation of stimuli across two independent samples and the use of contrastive image sets – substantially reduces the likelihood that participants' choices were based solely on misclassification or visual bias. The persistent interpretive difficulty observed in both visual and non-visual conditions supports the conclusion that the challenge lies primarily in unfamiliarity with the nonbinary morpheme itself.

In tackling the second research question, i.e., the processing costs of the suffix *-ə*, *Analysis 3* showed that the nonbinary singular condition had the slowest mean response time, while the plural condition recorded the fastest. This suggests that processing *-ə* for a single referent is indeed more demanding, as reflected in significantly slower response times compared to traditional suffixes. However, the quick responses in the plural condition, where participants predominantly matched the description with a nonbinary-only group, indicate no added cognitive load in that context. We propose that participants experienced hesitation when assigning a singular identity to *-ə*, but felt more confident and flexible when interpreting it as referring to a group. This may be due to the fact that a plurality by its very nature admits of multiple possibilities, hence indirectly instilling much more confidence in the participants. Another reason could be that diverse strategies were implemented when dealing with singular and plural *-ə*, which were also computed differently as mirrored in response times.

To address the third research question, i.e., the possible male-specific bias of the masculine form, we analyzed the gender distribution within the masculine condition. The results showed a clear preference for male-only group images, confirming that the masculine plural form is consistently interpreted specifically as referring only to men. Thus, the ambiguity between specific and generic meaning is resolved in favor of the specific, supporting the presence of a male bias. This evidence strengthens the argument against using the unmarked masculine as a truly generic form, since it naturally evokes male referents. Proof of the existing semantic ambiguity also comes from response times, as the masculine plural condition recorded exceptionally slow mean response time, compared to its singular counterpart. Regardless of the final decision that most often fell on an exclusively male representation, the doubt as to which group should be selected must have aroused, as time attests. It is no coincidence that the same trend is observed for the neutral condition, which presents the slowest mean response time for the plural, and the second-slowest for the singular. What we are observing here is that in the absence of any gender cue, the process of referent selection becomes even more time-consuming, as the range of choices is broader. Particularly interesting is the landing point: when no gender information can be retrieved, participants tend to resort to the male interpretation, also known as the default value. This finding is rather significant considering that one of the suggested strategies against the generic masculine is precisely the use of neutral forms, which however turned out to be assigned a male referent, a result consistent with previous literature (see Ducoli, Giusti, Lebani 2024). Although participants were explicitly instructed to match the description with the picture of the referent, hence ascribing a gender to the described

candidate, there are reasons to believe that there is no such thing as a neutral condition.

The questionnaires are a valuable supplementary tool in that they force participants to express their own judgments on inclusive language as well as their engagement with the activity of reading. Through the SILUI we accessed (i) participants' view on the sexist use of language, (ii) their ability to recognize instances of such use and (iii) their openness to inclusive language. What emerged is that our SPMT-sample of participants, as young as it is (age range 18-30 years), has a positive attitude toward inclusive language and is prepared to put it into practice. This pattern is also evident in the follow-up TCET sample. In drawing upon previous research (Visser, Krosnick 1998; Eaton et al. 2009), we believe that age is a predictor of attitudes towards innovative uses and their implementation, as the young population is more prone to challenge traditional roles and embrace change, compared to the older population.

The responses obtained from the *Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits* allowed us to profile our sample of participants in terms of the level of exposure to the phenomenon under investigation. Crucially, the suffix *-ə* was identified as the most popular strategy in pursuing a gender-fair language. The last two questions offered a glimpse into how the suffix *-ə* is perceived and experienced by the participants. When urged to read aloud a sentence containing the suffix *-ə* in an attempt to assess the difficulty in producing the corresponding sound and accessing its meaning, most participants did not define it as an obstacle to reading; they found it easy to interpret, yet quite difficult to pronounce. In order to explore the actual feasibility of the suffix *-ə* in spoken language, an expansion of the reading aloud section is required, possibly accompanied by the simulation of a dialogue that makes use of such strategy. Since the suffix *-ə* is used most frequently in the written form, including items that involve writing would provide a more comprehensive assessment of participants' abilities.

In line with our broader investigation, the correlation analysis between reading frequency and response times provides additional support for the role of reading experience in shaping processing efficiency. Although the observed effect was modest, participants who reported reading more books per year demonstrated slightly faster response times. This suggests that regular reading, particularly in digital formats, may enhance the ability to process linguistic input more swiftly. These findings underscore the relevance of individual reading habits in experimental tasks involving novel or morphologically complex forms, and further highlight how reading experience can subtly influence language processing outcomes.

In summary, based on the SPMT data, the plural suffix *-ə* appears to have a better chance of being widely adopted, as participants

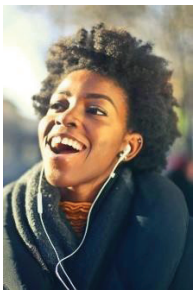
performed better with it compared to the singular suffix *-ə*. However, data from the TCET hint at a possible convergence toward the accuracy levels observed in the other experimental conditions, leaving open the prospect of a broader use of this suffix. Furthermore, having established that the masculine form is inherently male-dominant and cannot be unbiased, the substitution with neutral forms still poses problems. These neutral forms tend to direct participants' interpretations toward a male representation, likely because, in the absence of explicit gender cues, the default assumption is male, which then materializes in the selection of a male image. This is also confirmed by the TCET, which shows a clear preference for the label *male* when presented with a stimulus unmarked for gender. It seems thus that to be on the safe side, it is better to use the generic feminine (cf. Pires 2020) or the option consisting of both masculine and feminine nouns ('splitting/doubling', cf. De Cesare 2022a), which, however, still excludes any explicit reference to identities situated outside the gender binarism.

Finally, we should point out that some aspects of our experimental design can be further improved, such as randomizing the order in which the images are presented, especially in the task testing the plural counting 18 images per screen, so as to control for the potential effect exerted by the order of presentation on participants' selection procedure. The spatial arrangement of the elements within an item should also be modified to avoid overwhelming participants with too many visuals and text at once. In fact, the initial decision to merge all information and instructions onto a single screen was dictated solely by the platform's limitations related to response time recording (i.e., *Gorilla*). This issue was addressed in the experimental design of the follow-up study, which led to the elimination of the images not only to circumvent issues of visualization and representation of gender identities, but also to ensure a more balanced spatial distribution of the elements on each screen. However, this modification made it impossible to take response times into account, as they referred exclusively to the evaluation stage, while the reading of the prompts was in fact excluded. An additional key to understanding the persistent association between the nonbinary condition and the female gender – although somewhat reduced in the TCET – may lie, among the many reasons already posited, in the fact that participants unfamiliar with the suffix *-ə* might have misread it as a typo for *-e*, given the visual similarity between the two characters. This confusion points to a potential limitation of the adopted written medium, as opposed to an oral one, which would in contrast present different challenges related to the perception and realization of the sound – an issue we leave open for future research.

Appendix

Appendix A. Femininity-Masculinity Image Evaluation Survey

For each photo of the feminine, nonbinary and masculine categories, the mean score, most frequent score and the assigned label are reported.

PHOTO 1	**Mean score**: 2.29	PHOTO 2 	**Mean score**: 2.18
	Most frequent score: 2 33.7% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 1 39.3% of participants
	Photo rated as feminine		**Photo rated as** feminine

DOI 10.30687/979-12-5742-035-2/008

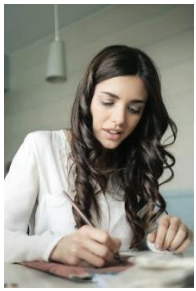
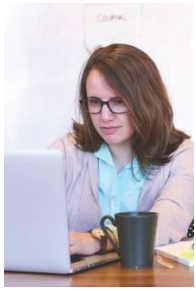
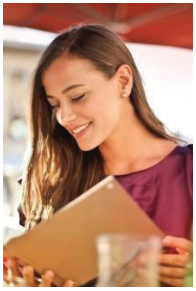
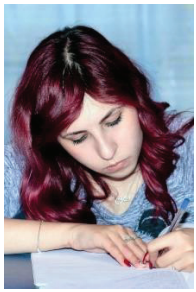
PHOTO 3 	**Mean score**: 1.63	PHOTO 4	**Mean score**: 2.31
	Most frequent score: 1 60.7% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 2 31.5% of participants
	Photo rated as feminine		**Photo rated as** feminine
PHOTO 5 	**Mean score**: 2.72	PHOTO 6 	**Mean score**: 1.44
	Most frequent score: 3 25.8% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 1 69.7% of participants
	Photo rated as feminine		**Photo rated as** feminine
PHOTO 7 	**Mean score**: 2.16	PHOTO 8	**Mean score**: 1.94
	Most frequent score: 1 37.1% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 1 44.9% of participants
	Photo rated as feminine		**Photo rated as** feminine

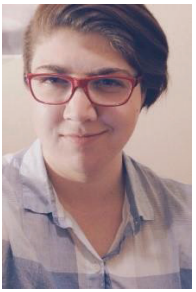
PHOTO 9	**Mean score**: 4.04	PHOTO 10	**Mean score**: 3.48
	Most frequent score: 3 27% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 3 25.8% of participants
	Photo rated as nonbinary		**Photo rated as** nonbinary
PHOTO 11	**Mean score**: 4.09	PHOTO 12	**Mean score**: 5.24
	Most frequent score: 4 27% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 5 36% of participants
	Photo rated as nonbinary		**Photo rated as** nonbinary
PHOTO 13	**Mean score**: 5.46	PHOTO 14 	**Mean score**: 4.42
	Most frequent score: 5 30.3% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 4 30.3% of participants
	Photo rated as nonbinary		**Photo rated as** nonbinary

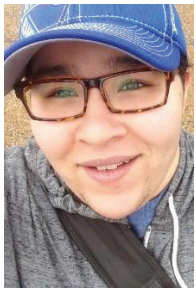
PHOTO 15 	**Mean score**: 5.38	PHOTO 16	**Mean score**: 4.89
	Most frequent score: 5 32.6% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 5 29.2% of participants
	Photo rated as nonbinary		**Photo rated as** nonbinary

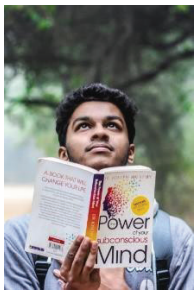
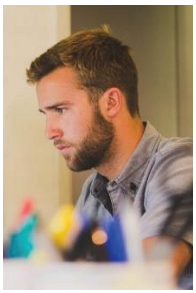
PHOTO 17 	**Mean score**: 8.42	PHOTO 18 	**Mean score**: 9.06
	Most frequent score: 10 30.3% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 10 49.4% of participants
	Photo rated as masculine		**Photo rated as** masculine
PHOTO 19	**Mean score**: 8.92	PHOTO 20	**Mean score**: 8.33
	Most frequent score: 10 40.4% of participants		**Most frequent score**: 8 29.2% of participants
	Photo rated as masculine		**Photo rated as** masculine

PHOTO 21 	**Mean score**: 8.37 **Most frequent score**: 10 28.1% of participants **Photo rated as** masculine	PHOTO 22 	**Mean score**: 8.40 **Most frequent score**: 10 37.1% of participants **Photo rated as** masculine
PHOTO 23 	**Mean score**: 8.28 **Most frequent score**: 8 25.8% of participants **Photo rated as** masculine	PHOTO 24 	**Mean score**: 8.99 **Most frequent score**: 10 52.8% of participants **Photo rated as** masculine

Appendix B. Sentence-Picture Matching Task (SPMT)

The items of the sentence-picture matching task (SPMT) are presented here together with the English translation. The translation signals gender marking following the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Subjects placed within square brackets are null subjects in Italian given its pro-drop nature.

SINGULAR CONDITION
Istruzioni:

Bando per l'affidamento di attività tutoriali

SELEZIONE PER L'AFFIDAMENTO DI ATTIVITÀ TUTORIALI, DIDATTICO-INTEGRATIVE, ATTIVITÀ PROPEDEUTICHE E DI RECUPERO

Il Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali indice una selezione per titoli per l'affidamento a studenti capaci e meritevoli, iscritti ai corsi di dottorato, di attività tutoriali, didattico-integrative, propedeutiche e di recupero da svolgere nel primo semestre dell'a.a. 2022/2023. I tutor dovranno assicurare la propria disponibilità in tutto il periodo in cui si svolgerà il servizio. In particolare, è possibile presentare domanda per le seguenti attività: linguistica generale, lingua inglese 1, e linguistica applicata.

La selezione verrà svolta da una Commissione appositamente nominata dalla Direttrice del Dipartimento con successivo provvedimento. Per agevolare l'intervento della Commissione, la segreteria ha preparato dei riassunti dei materiali di candidatura degli studenti che hanno partecipato al concorso.

A partire da questi materiali, il tuo compito sarà quello di esprimere, per ciascun candidato, un giudizio in termini di:

1. Preparazione accademica (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
2. Esperienza pregressa (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
3. Idoneità al ruolo (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)

Una volta conclusa questa prima fase di valutazione, ti verrà chiesto di selezionare l'immagine raffigurante il candidato descritto.

Instructions:

'**Mentoring Program Call for Applications**

Recruitment procedure for educational and remedial courses

The Department of Linguistics and Cultural Studies announces a merit-based selection process for the assignment of mentoring educational and remedial activities. This is awarded to capable and deserving students.M.PL enrolled.M.PL in Ph.D. programs, to be carried out in the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023. Mentors.M.PL must ensure their availability for the entire period during which the service will be carried out. In particular, applications may be submitted for the following activities: General Linguistics, English Language 1, and Applied Linguistics.

A special committee appointed by the dean at a later time is in charge of the selection procedure. To facilitate the committee's work, summaries of the application materials for each student.M.SG were provided by the administrative office.

Your job is to read the summary and rate each student.M.SG on various qualities, and to decide whether to recommend them for the position.
1. Academic Preparation (Poor Average Good Outstanding)
2. Previous Experience (Poor Average Good Outstanding)
3. Suitability for the Role (Strongly Discourage Discourage Recommend Strongly Recommend)

Once this initial assessment phase has been completed, you are asked to select the photo that matches the description of the candidate.M.SG.'

Masculine singular item 1

Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del *primo* anno in *Filologia classica, italianistica e linguistica*. In magistrale, si è laureato con un voto di *110L*. La media ponderata del candidato, in magistrale, era di *29.2*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento del candidato è *Lingua*, *Letteratura, Filologia Latina*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *La traduzione di Omero in Virgilio: sondaggi dal primo libro dell'Eneide*. Il candidato vanta *3* pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stato tutor di *2* corsi. Il candidato risulta regolarmente iscritto per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG in Classical Philology, Italian Studies and Linguistics. [He] graduated.M.SG from the MA program with 110 cum laude. The weighted average mark of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG during the master was 29.2. The leading discipline of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG in the academic arena is Latin Language, Literature and Philology. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The translation of Homer in Virgil: surveys from the first book of the Aeneid.* The.M.SG candidate.M.SG has 3 publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [he] mentored.M.SG in two courses. The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is duly enrolled.M.SG in the current academic year.'

Masculine singular item 2

Il candidato è uno studente dottorale del *primo* anno in *Marketing per la tutela dei beni culturali in Italia*. In magistrale, si è laureato con un voto di *101*. La media ponderata del candidato, in magistrale, era di *25.2*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento del candidato è *Antropologia culturale e artistica*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà: *Digitalizzazione delle visite museali: il caso degli Uffizi*. Il candidato *non* vanta pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ma esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stato tutor di *3* corsi. Il candidato risulta regolarmente iscritto per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is a.M.SG first-year PhD student.M.SG in Cultural Heritage Marketing. [He] graduated.M.SG from the MA program with 101. The weighted average mark of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG during the master was 25.2. The leading discipline of the.M.SG candidate.M.SG in the academic arena is Anthropology of Art. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *Digitization and virtual experience of museums: a case study of the Uffizi.* The.M.SG candidate.M.SG has no publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [he] mentored.M.SG

in three courses. The.M.SG candidate.M.SG is duly enrolled.M.SG in the current academic year.'

Feminine singular item 1
La candidata è una studentessa dottorale del *primo* anno in *Scienze linguistiche - Curriculum Linguistica educativa*. In magistrale, si è laureata con un voto di *104*. La media ponderata della candidata, in magistrale, era di *26.3*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento della candidata è *Psicologia cognitiva e dello sviluppo*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *Lo sviluppo della teoria della mente in contesti di deprivazione*. La candidata vanta *1* pubblicazione nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stata tutor di *1* corso. La candidata risulta regolarmente iscritta per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is a.F.SG first-year PhD student.F.SG in Language Sciences - Educational Linguistics Curriculum. [She] graduated.F.SG from the MA program with 104. The weighted average mark of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG during the master was 26.3. The leading discipline of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG in the academic arena is Cognitive and Developmental Psychology. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The Development of the Theory of Mind in Cases of Environmental Deprivation*. The.F.SG candidate.F.SG has 1 publication in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [she] mentored.F.SG in one course. The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is duly enrolled.F.SG in the current academic year.'

Feminine singular item 2
La candidata è una studentessa dottorale del *primo* anno in *Lingue e letterature straniere - Curriculum europeo*. In magistrale, si è laureata con un voto di *109*. La media ponderata della candidata, in magistrale, era di *28.9*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento della candidata è *Lingua, Letteratura, Filologia Inglese*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *La poetica femminista nel teatro americano del XXI secolo*. La candidata vanta *2* pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è stata tutor di *2* corsi.
La candidata risulta regolarmente iscritta per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is a.F.SG first-year PhD student.F.SG in Foreign Languages and Literature - European Curriculum. [She] graduated.F.SG from the MA program with 109. The weighted average mark of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG during the master was 28.9. The leading discipline of the.F.SG candidate.F.SG in the academic arena is English Language, Literature and Philology. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *Feminist Poetics in the 21st Century American Theatre.* The.F.SG candidate.F.SG has 2 publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [she] mentored.F.SG in two courses. The.F.SG candidate.F.SG is duly enrolled.F.SG in the current academic year.'

Nonbinary singular item 1
Lə candidatə è unə studentə dottorale del *primo* anno in *Linguistica applicata all'ambito clinico infantile*. In magistrale, si è laureatə con un voto di *108*. La media

ponderata dellə candidatə, in magistrale, era di *28.7*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dellə candidatə è *Linguistica per l'acquisizione patologica*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *L'insegnamento esplicito delle frasi relative in bambini con DPL*. Lə candidatə vanta *3* pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è statə tutor di *2* corsi. Lə candidatə risulta regolarmente iscrittə per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is a.NB.SG first-year PhD student.NB.SG in Clinical Linguistics Applied to Language in Childhood. [They] graduated.NB.SG from the MA program with 108. The weighted average mark of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG during the master was 28.7. The leading discipline of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG in the academic arena is Linguistics for Atypical Language Acquisition. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The explicit teaching of relative clauses in children with DLD.* The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG has 3 publications in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [they] mentored.NB.SG in two courses. The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is duly enrolled.NB.SG in the current academic year.'

Nonbinary singular item 2

Lə candidatə è unə studentə dottorale del *secondo* anno in *Scienze del linguaggio - Percorso in Linguaggio e cognizione*. In magistrale, si è laureatə con un voto di *110*. La media ponderata dellə candidatə, in magistrale, era di *27.3*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dellə candidatə è *Semantica e linguistica computazionale*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *I frame semantici dei verbi di moto. Prime annotazioni su FrameNet.* Lə candidatə vanta *1* pubblicazione nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico; nello specifico, è statə tutor di *1* corso.
Lə candidatə risulta regolarmente iscrittə per l'anno accademico in corso.

'The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is a.NB.SG second-year PhD student.NB.SG in Language Sciences - Language and Cognition Curriculum. [They] graduated.NB.SG from the MA program with 110. The weighted average mark of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG during the master was 27.3. The leading discipline of the.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG in the academic arena is Computational Linguistics and Semantics. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *Semantic frames of motion verbs. First annotations on FrameNet*. The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG has 1 publication in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor; specifically, [they] mentored.NB.SG in one course. The.NB.SG candidate.NB.SG is duly enrolled.NB.SG in the current academic year.'

Neutral singular item 1

L'aspirante tutor frequenta il *primo* anno di dottorato in *Scienze del linguaggio - Curriculum Letterario editoriale*. Ha conseguito la laurea magistrale con un voto di *98*. La media ponderata dell'aspirante tutor era di *23.9*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dell'aspirante tutor è *Elementi di editoria informatica*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *Dalla carta al digitale: gli effetti sulle piccole case*

editrici. L'aspirante tutor *non* vanta pubblicazioni nella disciplina di interesse ma esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico di *1* corso.
L'iscrizione all'anno accademico in corso risulta regolarmente registrata.

'The applicant for the position of mentor is carrying out the first year of doctoral research in Language sciences - Literary Publishing Curriculum. Having graduated from the MA program with 98, the weighted average mark of the applicant during the master was 23.9, whose leading discipline in the academic arena is Elements of Digital Publishing. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *From paper to digital: the effects on small publishing houses*. The applicant has no publications in the discipline of interest but past experience as a specialized mentor for 1 course. Enrollment in the current academic year appears to be duly registered.'

Neutral singular item 2
L'aspirante tutor frequenta il *secondo* anno di dottorato in *Lingue, culture, comunicazione e studi culturali*. Ha conseguito la laurea magistrale con un voto di *107*. La media ponderata dell'aspirante tutor era di *27.5*. In ambito accademico, la disciplina di riferimento dell'aspirante tutor è *Lingua e cultura dei paesi anglosassoni*. Il suo argomento di tesi dottorale sarà *Il processo di naturalizzazione degli Stati Uniti d'America*. L'aspirante tutor vanta *1* pubblicazione nella disciplina di interesse ed esperienza pregressa come tutor specialistico di *1* corso.
L'iscrizione all'anno accademico in corso risulta regolarmente registrata.

'The applicant for the position of mentor is carrying out the second year of doctoral research in Languages, Cultures, Communication and Cultural Studies. Having graduated from the MA program with 107, the weighted average mark of the applicant during the master was 27.5, whose leading discipline in the academic arena is Language and Culture of Anglo-Saxon Countries. The topic of the doctoral dissertation is *The Naturalization Procedures in the United States*. The applicant has 1 publication in the discipline of interest and past experience as a specialized mentor for 1 course. Enrollment in the current academic year appears to be duly registered.'

PLURAL CONDITION
Istruzioni:

Bando per il finanziamento di progetti di ricerca nel campo di Scienze della Vita

Con il presente bando si intende promuovere il potenziamento della ricerca e dell'innovazione nel settore di Scienze della Vita attraverso il sostegno a progetti di ricerca che ***contribuiscono alla creazione di condizioni di benessere duraturo e sostenibile in termini di salute e crescita per gli esseri umani e l'ambiente****. A tale scopo, il programma si prefigge di finanziare progetti che per complessità e natura richiedono la collaborazione di più unità di ricerca. La costituzione del gruppo di ricerca è dunque flessibile, purché veda la partecipazione di più unità provenienti dallo stesso ateneo: LS - Scienze della vita.*

La selezione verrà svolta da una Commissione appositamente nominata che si pronuncerà a partire dai seguenti materiali di candidatura preparati dalla segreteria. Il tuo compito sarà quello di visionarli ed esprimere, per ciascun progetto, una valutazione sulla base dei tre parametri proposti:

1. pertinenza della proposta progettuale rispetto all'obiettivo in grassetto (cioè quanto questa proposta risponde all'obiettivo) (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)
2. originalità e impatto sociale del progetto di ricerca (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente);
3. qualità del profilo scientifico del gruppo di ricerca (basandoti su bandi vinti, esperienza, pubblicazioni) (scarsa, media, buona, eccellente)

Una volta terminata questa prima fase, ti si chiede di selezionare l'immagine che pensi possa raffigurare il gruppo di ricerca descritto.

Instructions:

'**Call for proposals:**
Grant funding opportunities for research projects in the field of Life Sciences

The purpose of this call is to promote research and foster innovation in the field of Life Sciences by supporting research projects that ***contribute to creating conditions of lasting and sustainable well-being in terms of health and growth for both human beings and the environment****. To this end, the program aims at funding projects that by their complexity and nature require the collaboration of multiple research units. Group composition is therefore flexible, as long as it sees the participation of more than one unit from the same university: LS - Life Sciences.*

A specially appointed committee is in charge of the selection procedure, whose work is based on the following application materials that were provided by the administrative office. Your job is to go through them, one by one, and rate each project on the basis of the three proposed parameters:

1. Relevance of the project proposal to the objective in bold (i.e., how well this proposal meets the objective) (Poor Average Good Outstanding);
2. Originality and social impact of the research project (Poor Average Good Outstanding);
3. Quality of the research team's scientific profile (based on previous grants, experience, publications) (Poor Average Good Outstanding);

Once this initial assessment phase has been completed, you are asked to select the photo that matches the described research team.'

Masculine plural item 1

I candidati sono *ricercatori a tempo determinato di tipo A*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultati vincitori di 1 bando. I candidati propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Analisi genetica di persone con Corea di Huntington*; la cui finalità è di *proporre nuove strategie farmacologiche e cellulari per rallentarne il decorso o bloccarne l'insorgenza*. I candidati saranno impegnati nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *24* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Santa Barbara, California*.
Tutti i candidati si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *5* anni. Sono autori di *5* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are fixed-term type A researchers.M.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.M.PL winners.M.PL of a funding program. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are proposing the following research project: *Genetic testing for Huntington's chorea*; the aim of which is to come up with new pharmacological and cellular strategies to slow down its course or block its onset. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL will be engaged.M.PL in the research activity for a period of 24 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Santa Barbara, California.
All.M.PL (the.M.PL) candidates.M.PL have been committed.M.PL to this field of research for 5 years. [They] have authored.M.PL 5 scientific publications on the subject.'

Masculine plural item 2
I candidati sono *assegnisti di ricerca*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* sono risultati vincitori di bandi. I candidati propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Ricerca in ambito tropicale di modelli innovativi per gli allevamenti*, la cui finalità è di *progettare modelli sostenibili di produzione, gestione zootecnica e igienico-sanitaria degli animali.* I candidati saranno impegnati nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *12* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Kuala Lumpur, Malesia*.
Tutti i candidati si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni. Sono autori di *2* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are research fellows.M.PL. In previous years, [they] were never announced.M.PL winners.M.PL of a funding program. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL are proposing the following research project: *Research on innovative tropical livestock production*; the aim of which is to design sustainable livestock production systems, by guaranteeing their management and animal hygiene. The.M.PL candidates.M.PL will be engaged.M.PL in the research activity for a period of 12 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
All.M.PL (the.M.PL) candidates.M.PL have been committed.M.PL to this field of research for 3 years. [They] have authored.M.PL 2 scientific publications on the subject.'

Feminine plural item 1
Le candidate sono *professoresse ordinarie*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultate vincitrici di *2* bandi. Le candidate propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio delle interazioni tra specie e uomo-ambiente*, la cui finalità è di *studiare le risposte delle comunità biologiche ai cambiamenti globali a tutela della loro sopravvivenza e del mantenimento della biodiversità*. Le candidate saranno impegnate nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *24* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Lima, Perù*.
Tutte le candidate si sono dedicate a questo settore di ricerca per *7* anni. Sono autrici di *6* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are full.F.PL professors.F.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.F.PL winners.F.PL of two funding programs. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are proposing the following research project: *The study of organism-environment*

and human-environment interactions; the aim of which is to study the responses of biological communities to global changes for the safeguard of biodiversity conservation. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL will be engaged.F.PL in the research activity for a period of 24 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Lima, Peru.
All.F.PL (the.F.PL) candidates.F.PL have been committed.F.PL to this field of research for 7 years. [They] have authored.F.PL 6 scientific publications on the subject.'

Feminine plural item 2
Le candidate sono *professoresse associate*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultate vincitrici di *1* bando. Le candidate propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Ricerca sui tumori dell'apparato digerente*, la cui finalità è di *sviluppare strategie innovative in ambito diagnostico e terapeutico per migliorare la preparazione e conduzione di interventi chirurgici per cancro*. Le candidate saranno impegnate nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *24* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Oslo, Norvegia*.
Tutte le candidate si sono dedicate a questo settore di ricerca per *7* anni. Sono autrici di *7* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are associate.F.PL professors.F.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.F.PL winners.F.PL of one funding program. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL are proposing the following research project: *Digestive cancer research*; the aim of which is to develop novel strategies for cancer treatment for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes. The.F.PL candidates.F.PL will be engaged.F.PL in the research activity for a period of 24 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Oslo, Norway.
All.F.PL (the.F.PL) candidates.F.PL have been committed.F.PL to this field of research for 7 years. [They] have authored.F.PL 7 scientific publications on the subject.'

Nonbinary plural item 1
Lə candidatə sono *ricercatorə post doc*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* sono risultatə vincitorə di bandi. Lə candidatə propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Analisi economica del consumatore sul piano comportamentale*, la cui finalità è di *potenziare l'etichettatura dei prodotti alimentari, nonché i consumi sostenibili e salutistici, contro l'obesità*. Lə candidatə saranno impegnatə nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *12* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Londra, Regno Unito*.
Tuttə lə candidatə si sono dedicatə a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni. Sono autorə di *2* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are postdoctoral researchers.NB.PL. In previous years, [they] were never announced.NB.PL winners.NB.PL of a funding program. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are proposing the following research project: *Consumer Behavior Analysis*; the aim of which is to enhance food labeling, as well as sustainable and healthy consumption, in order to fight obesity. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL will be engaged.NB.PL in the research activity for a period of 12 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of London, Great Britain.

All.NB.PL (the.NB.PL) candidates.NB.PL have been committed.NB.PL to this field of research for 3 years. [They] have authored.NB.PL 2 scientific publications on the subject.'

Nonbinary plural item 2

Lə candidatə sono *professorə ordinariə*. Negli anni precedenti, sono già risultatə vincitorə di *2* bandi. Lə candidatə propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio di psicologia clinica per il sostegno psicologico di pazienti con diagnosi di malattie rare*, la cui finalità è di *combattere le difficoltà psico-emotive di adattamento a carico di famiglie e pazienti*. Lə candidatə saranno impegnatə nell'attività di ricerca per un periodo di *18* mesi, e il progetto prevede la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Lisbona, Portogallo*.
Tuttə lə candidatə si sono dedicatə a questo settore di ricerca per *7* anni. Sono autorə di *6* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are full.NB.PL professors.NB.PL. In previous years, [they] were announced.NB.PL winners.NB.PL of two funding programs. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL are proposing the following research project: *Exploring Psychological Support at Diagnosis of a Rare Disease*; the aim of which is to manage how to cope with psycho-emotional adjustment difficulties faced by families and patients. The.NB.PL candidates.NB.PL will be engaged.NB.PL in the research activity for a period of 18 months, and the project involves collaboration with the University of Lisbon, Portugal.
All.NB.PL (the.NB.PL) candidates.NB.PL have been committed.NB.PL to this field of research for 7 years. [They] have authored.NB.PL 6 scientific publications on the subject.'

Neutral plural item 1

I membri del gruppo di ricerca *beneficiano di un assegno di ricerca*. Negli anni precedenti, *non* hanno vinto alcun bando. Tali membri propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio di nuovi alimenti ed ingredienti alimentari*, la cui finalità è di *promuovere la salute attraverso il miglioramento dell'alimentazione e dello stile di vita*. L'attività di raccolta dati di ricerca richiederà un impegno complessivo pari a un periodo di *12* mesi, e per il loro progetto è prevista la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Amsterdam, Paesi Bassi*. Tutti i membri si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *3* anni e vantano un numero di *4* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'Members of the research team are currently conducting research by means of a research grant. They have never won a funding program before. Members are proposing the following research project: *Study of new foods and new ingredients*, the aim of which is to promote health through improved nutrition and lifestyle. The research activity of data collection will require a total commitment of 12 months. The project involves collaboration with the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. All members have been working in this field of research for 3 years and count 4 scientific publications on the topic.'

Neutral plural item 2

I membri del gruppo di ricerca *beneficiano di un assegno di ricerca*. Negli anni precedenti, hanno vinto *3* bandi. Tali membri propongono il seguente progetto di ricerca: *Studio degli impatti dei cambiamenti climatici*, la cui finalità è di *descrivere la geodiversità e monitorare l'adattamento ai cambiamenti del clima*. L'attività di raccolta dati di ricerca richiederà un impegno complessivo pari a un periodo di *18* mesi, e per il loro progetto è prevista la collaborazione con l'ateneo di *Bordeaux, Francia*.
Tutti i membri si sono dedicati a questo settore di ricerca per *5* anni e vantano un numero di *5* pubblicazioni scientifiche sull'argomento.

'Members of the research team are currently conducting research by means of a research grant. In previous years, [they] won three funding programs. Members are proposing the following research project: *Study of climate-change impacts*, the aim of which is to describe geodiversity and monitor adaptation to climate change. The research activity of data collection will require a total commitment of 18 months. The project involves collaboration with the University of Bordeaux, France. All members have been working in this field of research for 5 years and count 5 scientific publications on the topic.'

Appendix C. Sexist/Inclusive Language Use in Italian (SILUI)

Questionario sull'uso sessista/inclusivo della lingua italiana

Sezione I: Convinzioni personali sull'uso sessista della lingua italiana
Sezione II: Riconoscere la lingua sessista
Sezione III: Apertura all'uso del linguaggio inclusivo

Definizione guida: *L'uso sessista della lingua concerne parole, frasi ed espressioni che tracciano distinzioni superflue tra maschi e femmine o che escludono, ridicolizzano o sminuiscono uno dei generi e ignorano completamente la possibilità che ci siano persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere (non binary).*

Sezione I: Convinzioni personali sull'uso sessista della lingua italiana

Leggi la definizione nel riquadro e indica quanto ti trovi d'accordo (1 per nulla d'accordo - 5 completamente d'accordo) con le seguenti frasi:

1. Il fatto che Giorgia Meloni si faccia chiamare "il signor presidente" è da considerarsi una scelta sessista.
2. Non dovremmo cambiare il modo in cui la lingua italiana è stata tradizionalmente scritta e parlata.
3. Il linguaggio inclusivo è una questione di poco conto.
4. Il maschile plurale non è davvero inclusivo, ma dovremmo comunque continuare a usarlo per riferirci a gruppi misti di persone (es. maschi, femmine e persone non binary) perché risulta più immediato.
5. Se una persona non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere è giusto che ci si riferisca a quella persona con ə: per es. *studentə*.
6. La lingua italiana non verrà mai cambiata perché è troppo radicata nella cultura.
7. L'eliminazione dell'uso sessista della lingua italiana è un obiettivo importante.
8. Dal momento che le norme editoriali impongono agli autori di articoli di giornale di evitare l'uso di insulti di carattere etnico-razziale dovrebbero imporre un divieto anche sull'uso sessista della lingua.
9. L'uso sessista della lingua italiana ha a che fare con il trattamento sessista delle persone nella società italiana.
10. Se in un gruppo di persone ci sono maschi, femmine e persone non binary, è giusto che ci si riferisca a loro con ə: per es. non *gli studenti* ma *lə studentə*.
11. Tutti quei professori che pretendono che i loro studenti evitino un uso sessista della lingua italiana non fanno altro che imporre le loro idee politiche sulla classe.
12. Anche se il cambiamento è difficile, dovremmo comunque cercare di eliminare l'uso sessista della lingua italiana.
13. È giusto che sulla carta d'identità dei minori restino le diciture "madre" e "padre" e saltino le qualifiche neutre "genitore 1" e "genitore 2".

Sezione II: Riconoscere la lingua sessista

Partendo dalla stessa definizione, indica se gli elementi in grassetto sono sessisti (1 per nulla sessista - 5 chiaramente sessista).

14. Marta è una donna transgender. È nat**o** nel 1986.
15. Lucia non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere. Lucia è cresciut**a** a Modena.
16. Serena ha superato con successo l'abilitazione all'avvocatura. Adesso Serena è **un** avvocat**o**.
17. **Le** maestr**e** delle scuole elementari tendono a dare tanto spazio alle attività ludiche.

Sezione III: Apertura all'uso del linguaggio inclusivo

Indica quanto saresti disponibile (1 per nulla disponibile - 5 molto disponibile) ad accogliere le pratiche descritte a seguire:

18. Quanto saresti disponibile a iniziare una mail con: *cari studenti, care studentesse e carə studentə* se sai che tra i destinatari sono presenti maschi, femmine e persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere?
19. Quanto saresti disponibile a iniziare una mail con: *carə studentə* se sai che tra i destinatari sono presenti maschi, femmine e persone che non si identificano nella distinzione binaria del genere?
20. Quanto saresti disponibile a utilizzare il termine "candidatə" al posto di "candidato" quando il referente non si identifica nella distinzione binaria del genere?

Appendix D. Questionnaire on Reading Preferences and Habits

Questionario sulle preferenze e le abitudini di lettura

1. Per quali motivi leggi? Puoi indicare una o due opzioni.
   - o Per studio / Per lavoro
   - o Per svago, nel tempo libero

2. Con che frequenza leggi le seguenti tipologie di testo?

1. Libri di testo scolastici / manuali universitari	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
2. Letteratura scientifica (pubblicazioni / articoli scientifici)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
3. Documentazione tecnica (circolari, normative, manuali d'uso…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
4. Narrativa (romanzi, racconti…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
5. Saggistica	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
6. Stampa periodica (quotidiani, riviste…)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
7. Informazioni online (argomenti vari: attualità, cucina, sport, cultura, viaggi, moda...)	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
8. Altro (specificare): ……	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

3. Quanto tempo dedichi alla lettura, in media, in un giorno?
   - o Meno di un'ora
   - o Da una a due ore
   - o Da due a tre ore
   - o Da tre a quattro ore
   - o Più di quattro ore

4. Quanti libri hai letto, nel tempo libero, nell'ultimo anno? ……

5. Con che frequenza leggi su queste tipologie di supporto?

Carta stampata	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Smartphone	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Computer	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Tablet	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
E-reader	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

6. In generale, preferisci leggere:
   - o su supporto cartaceo
   - o su supporto digitale
   - o non ho preferenze

7. Quanto sei d'accordo con queste affermazioni? (scegli un'opzione da 1 = per niente d'accordo a 5= molto d'accordo)

Leggere è un'attività piacevole	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è un'attività noiosa	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è utile	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)
Leggere è faticoso	per niente d'accordo (1)	molto d'accordo (5)

8. "Un lettore esperto ha la capacità di integrare le informazioni di un testo con ciò che già conosce."
In base a questa affermazione, che tipo di lettore ti consideri?

poco esperto				molto esperto
1	2	3	4	5

9. Prima di prendere parte a questo esperimento, avevi già sentito parlare di linguaggio inclusivo?
sì / no

10. Hai già incontrato le seguenti strategie di linguaggio inclusivo nelle tue precedenti letture?

Coordinazione di termini femminili e maschili (*splitting*)	Salve a tutte e a tutti	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
Nomi collettivi (*oscuramento*)	Salve a tutte le persone qui presenti	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"*" come terminazione finale	Salve a tutt*	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"@" come terminazione finale	Salve a tutt@	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"_" come terminazione finale	Salve a tutt_	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"x" come terminazione finale	Salve a tuttx	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"u" come terminazione finale	Salve a tuttu	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)
"ə" come terminazione finale	Salve a tuttə	mai (1)	molto spesso (5)

11. Conosci altre strategie riconducibili al linguaggio inclusivo? ……

12. Indica in quali tipologie di testo hai già incontrato il simbolo "**ə**" (inserendo una x in corrispondenza della categoria d'interesse):

1. Libri di testo scolastici / manuali universitari	
2. Letteratura scientifica (pubblicazioni / articoli scientifici)	
3. Documentazione tecnica (circolari, normative, manuali d'uso…)	
4. Narrativa (romanzi, racconti…)	
5. Saggistica	
6. Stampa periodica (quotidiani, riviste…)	

7. Informazioni online (argomenti vari: attualità, cucina, sport, cultura, viaggi, moda...)	
8. Social media	
9. Altro (specificare): ……	

13. Nel complesso, reputi l'inserimento del simbolo "**ə**" a fine parola un elemento di ostacolo alla lettura della parola stessa?

assolutamente no				decisamente sì
1	2	3	4	5

14. Prova a leggere questa frase ad alta voce: *Lə candidatə è unə studentə dottorale del secondo anno in Scienze del linguaggio - Percorso in Linguaggio e cognizione*. Ti risulta difficile da pronunciare per via dell'inserimento del simbolo "ə"? Ti è chiaro a cosa si riferisce?

o è difficile da pronunciare ed è difficile capire il suo significato quando leggo
o è difficile da pronunciare, ma è facile capire il suo significato quando leggo
o è facile da pronunciare, ma è difficile capire il suo significato quando leggo
o è facile da pronunciare ed è facile capire il suo significato quando leggo

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Many morphological innovations have been proposed to expand the boundaries of gender binarism in Italian. To test the interpretation of -ə we designed an experiment adapting the sentence-picture matching task used by Bradley, Salkind, Moore, and Teitsort in 2019 for English. The study sets out to establish whether (i) the adoption of -ə entails activation of a nonbinary referent (or group) or a mixed-gender group; (ii) the comprehension of sentences containing -ə requires higher processing costs, by looking at participants' response times; (iii) the masculine form triggers the specific interpretation more frequently. To disentangle the contribution of linguistic processing from potential visual interference, a follow-up study was later conducted without images.

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